FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE
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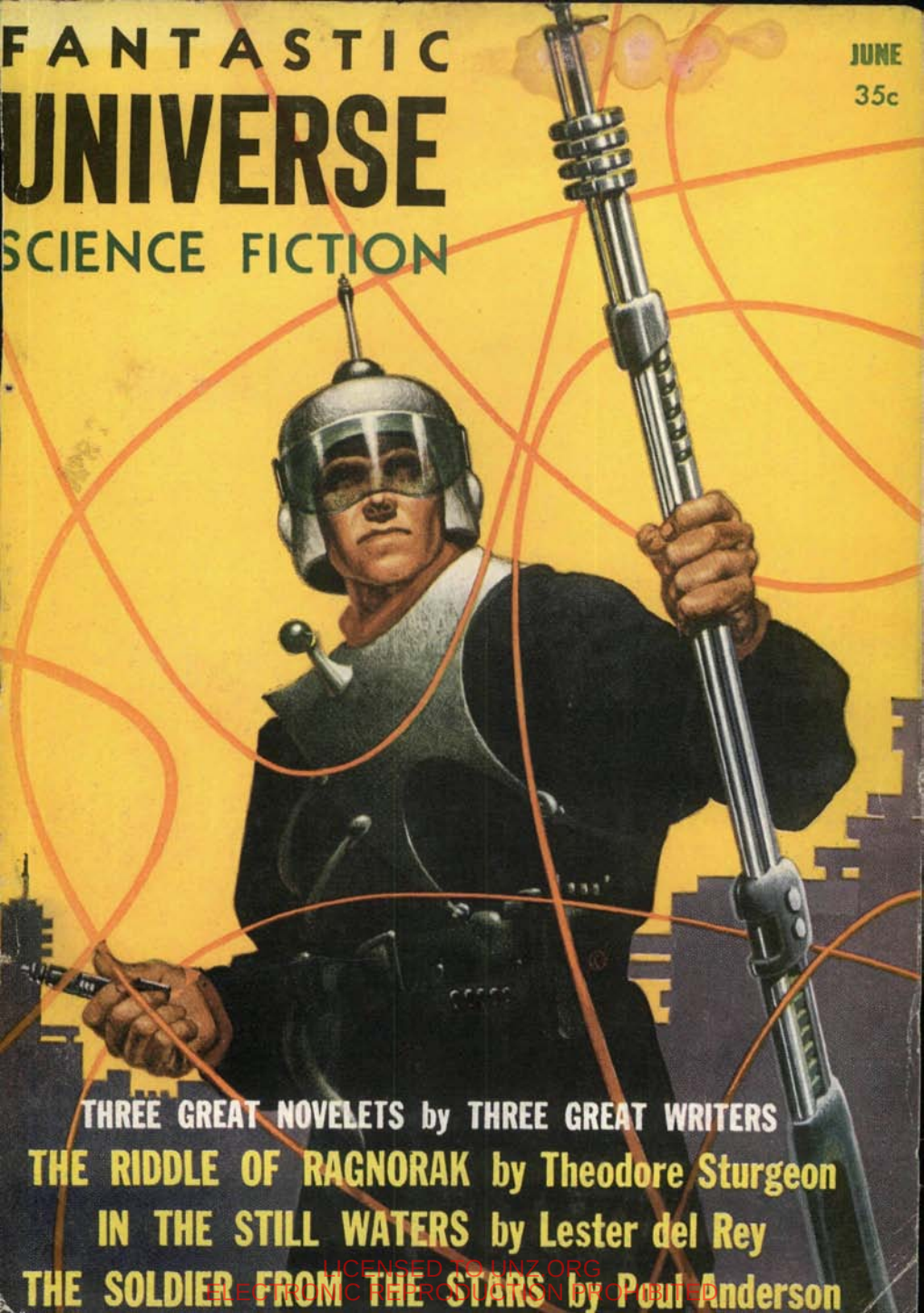

THREE GREAT NOVELETS by THREE GREAT WRITERS

THE RIDDLE OF RAGNORAK by Theodore Sturgeon

IN THE STILL WATERS by Lester del Rey

THE SOLDIER FROM THE STARS by Poul Anderson

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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

It is quite likely that the resplendent warrior—or, if you prefer, youth full-panoplied in all the pride and circumstance of a fighting man—will remain an historical constant throughout the entire course of human life on Earth.

New and more humanistic ends may shape his course, and warfare as we know it may be vanquished completely by a maturity which does not need to resort to sadistic aggression to bolster up an ego tormented by childhood frustration, guilt feelings, and economic insecurity. But even when men are completely free to release their energies in creative channels, and throw their thoughts outward to the stars they will continue to take pride in the vigor of their bodies and the strength of their minds.

Just how will the warrior of the future look as he confronts the only *real* enemy of man—the environmental crippling that stands in the way of personality fulfillment in the three great realms of beauty, scientific truth, and the mating instinct which on a humanistically enriched and reality-conforming plane of romantic love is life's chief justification under the stars?

The most recondite scholarship would be of very little assistance in our efforts to picture him, for scholarship at its best has a clumsy way with intangibles, and it would be extremely difficult to make a sound historical study of an age which does not yet exist.

But imagination is a winged centaur of a far more horizon-spanning temperament, and the speculative insight of a discerning artist often accomplishes miracles when all other means have failed.

Reserving the right to be mistaken, we venture to predict that the warrior of the future will look very much like the creatively embattled and resplendent lad in this month's cover illustration.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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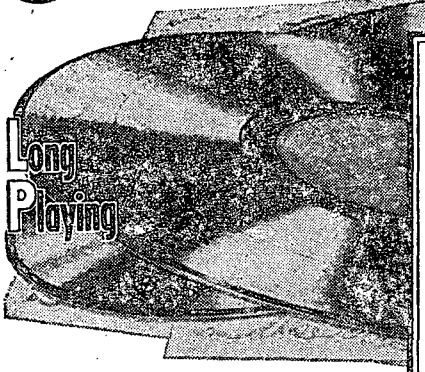

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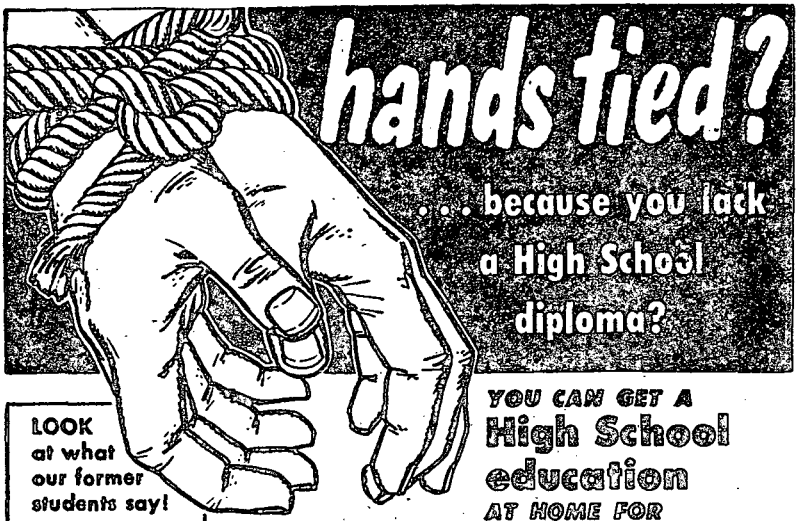

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the riddle of ragnarok

by . . . Theodore Sturgeon

It was a world of giants and of women whose limbs were magic—and fabulously strange were the weaving strands of its destiny.

JOY WAS NOT joy in Asgard, for all the ale and the heady mead, the singing and the wild hard laughter. Clink and clatter and clash rang the arms; whip and whicker and thud the arrows. Sinews were tuned and toned and honed and hardened, and speech was mighty, and much of the measureless night belonged to the unearthly yielding of the Aesir goddesses, whose limbs were magic.

Here were the heroes of Earth, here the dazzle-winged Valkyrs; here in the halls of not-quite-forever they feasted and fought and found that which mortality is too brief and too fragile to grant.

The Aesir were made for joy, and the heroes had earned it, and their joys were builded of battle, and to battle they built. The battle they faced was the battle of Ragnarok; they would fight the Giants at Ragnarok; they would dare death at Ragnarok, and there they would die.

There was woe in the winds about Asgard. It was there like a bitterness in the drinking horns and it cut like cold. Hope lay frozen in the iron ground, moon-silver man-

Theodore Sturgeon, who recently won the International Fantasy Committee AWARD *for the most distinguished SF novel of the year, is probably the most versatile of the scant dozen writers who have compelled the moulders of our literary climate to take science fiction seriously as an important branch of imaginative fiction. We are happy to welcome him to our pages for the first time with this glowingly fanciful saga of a realm enchanted.*

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tled the battlements like a winding-sheet, and against the stars the eagles floated, crying a harsh despair.

Heroes new-come to Valhalla heard of it, after their feast of honor, after they settled into the halls of the brave and looked about them and called this cold and mighty land their own. Sooner or later they asked and were told:

In the spring of the world when the mountains were new and the sea not salt, and Yggdrasil, tree of trees, but a blooming shrub, good Odin the sky-father, seeker of wisdom, descended a Well where dwelt Mimir the Wise. For a terrible price, the least part of which was one of his eyes; he was given knowledge unthinkable.

Odin learned the Runes, and the way to take from the Giants the skaldic mead which makes him who tastes it a poet. He learned the ways of wild things and the tricks of the halflings issuing from unspeakable unions between the Giants and the elf folk. But of all he learned, the greatest and most terrible was the doom of Asgard: the certain victory of the Giants at Ragnarok.

Ever after, Odin was dedicated to forestalling that Day. Never again did he laugh, and only his silent wife Frigga knew completely his torment, and would silently brood over it and weep as she spun threads of gold. At the feasts, Odin presided but would not eat; two great wolves who lay at his feet had his share. He seemed never to join altogether in the company, though he always attended.

He would sit at the board in his golden palace Gladsheim with his wolves and his two ravens—Hugin, who was Thought, and Munin, who was Memory—who used to fly the world and return to him with news of all that happened in it; and he would ponder. And sometimes in his kirtle of gray and his dazzling blue hood he would walk the battlements or stand searching the sky.

Then he might call Tyr, war's god, or Thor, mightiest of them all, and give them tasks and duties, the purpose of which only he could know; these were the means of strengthening Asgard and delaying Ragnarok; but for what? for what? Asgard was doomed.

So it was that all colors in Asgard bore a tint of sadness, and a piece of every voice was mourning.

A sadness such as this was a wonder, but it was not the only wonder of Asgard. There was once a greater wonder than the wisdom of Odin or the strength of Thor: it was a thing more beautiful even than the one part of Asgard visible to mortal eyes, the rainbow bridge of Heimdall. The god Freyr, of the fruits of Earth, never served the world so well, the songs of Freyr herself lent less glory to the world than did the young god Balder.

In this atmosphere of awe and strangeness, of power and of powers, Balder moved with the confidence of a child in a loving home.

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His quality was a brightness—not like that of gold, or steel, but that of summer mornings, clean hair, first love, or high new notes from some seasoned lute. He was goodness and all kindness, and he was loved as no man nor no thing was ever loved before or since.

Balder was loved by god and hero alike, by Giant and elf and halfling, by the beasts, by the rocks and the very sky. It was said, in Balder's time, that only he could keep life in doomed Asgard; only such light as his could cancel the dark shadow of Ragnarok.

He shed his light wherever he went, and he went everywhere. There lay in him no evil. He was welcomed, not only in Asgard, but in Jotunheim where the Giants dwelt. Hela, who ruled over the dead, found a smile—even she—for Balder, and in the blackest heart of the wilderness the bears sat like kittens and watched him pass.

As all things must somehow be matched and balanced, and since one of the Aesir could move freely in all realms, so there was the son of a Giant who drank and sang in Valhalla and Gladsheim when he willed; he was the laughing devil Loki. His eyes saw more than did the ravens of Odin, and his heart was a catacomb in which his loyalties and his loves could be led and lost.

Yet so quick was his wit and so hilarious his mischief that he might have been tolerated in doomed Asgard for these alone. But least of all things did he need to earn a place at the feasts of Gladsheim; he was sworn blood-brother to Odin in payment of an old partnership in the dawn of the world, and he could not be challenged.

So he went his way, careless; and about him was no fidelity nor anything which could be predicted, save his love for Balder: this, in the world, was as inescapable as sun, as frost, or any other pervading natural force.

Now on a terrible morning bright Balder woke wondering; he felt something which was, for him, most strange. He went to Frigga, his mother, and told her of it, and she listened and questioned him, and listened again, until she could tell him that what he felt was fear.

"Fear, Mother?" he said.

"Ay," she said; "a kind of warning, a foreboding of danger."

"I like it not, Mother."

"Nor do I; I shall take it from thee."

And take it she did.

What has never been done before or since, Frigga did; and if it were not that time is counted differently in Asgard than elsewhere, she would never have had time enough. All about Asgard she went, and among the Vanir, their neighbors; even through Jotunheim she walked, her mission opening gates before her like a magic key. She went also to the world of men, where, they say, she walked in the season between flower and frost,

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so that to this day Earth turns glorious for a time in memory of her, and then the leaves fall and the trees feign death in memory of what followed.

And she went to places where dwelt neither gods nor men, nor Giants: places with names better not recalled.

And to everyone and every thing she met—to stones and sky and all who lived between them; to roots however deep and to high air-sucking blossoms; to the blood-bearers, warm and cold; to all with fangs, feathers or fins, hands or hooves; and to the wind, and to ice, and the sea; to all these she spoke, saying, "I bring tidings of evil: the unthinkable has happened, and Balder is touched by fear. Give me thy promise that, from thee, harm shall never come to him! That is all I ask of thee."

Gladly then, gladly the high and the tall, the ancient, the once-living and the never-alive—all gave their bond; and not from them could harm come to Balder.

Back then to Asgard went Frigga, wearily. She noticed as she entered that high by the gate grew a tumble of glossy leaves and waxen white berries. She smiled then at the mistletoe, a green given to small and happy magics, and let it be, asking nothing of it. She sought out Balder and told him of what she had done, kissed his bright face and fell in a swoon.

She slept then, for a time long even in Asgard.

II

The news blew through stark Asgard like a warm wind, and the Aesir rejoiced. It was almost as if Ragnarok itself was removed from their thoughts—indeed, might not this be an inroad on their doom? For was not Balder of the Aesir? And were not the Aesir to die at Ragnarok? Yet now it was also true that no harm could come to Balder . . .

Ragnarok receded, and even Odin nearly smiled. He had, however, the habit of pondering, and it was a trouble to him that Ragnarok could be, or that Balder might live through it, but not both. He buried this problem in a silent place within him and there worked on it mightily.

Balder was given a feast at Gladsheim, with such singing, such tries of arms, such mountains of succulent food and oceans of mead as were memorable even in Asgard.

And it came about that Balder found himself standing in the courtyard, laughing, while all about him the warriors of Gladsheim and of Valhalla rushed at him with sword and mace, nocked and aimed their arrows, plunged and lunged at him with sword and lance.

The lances bent away from his shining body and the swords met a stony nothingness about him and bounced away ringing. The arrows rose to pass him, or slipped aside.

Above on her throne, Frigga sat watching. She was pale still from

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her ordeal and perhaps overwrought because of it. She kept touching her lips as if to stop their trembling, or perhaps to check some warning she knew was unneeded. This was Balder's pleasure and that of the gods and heroes about him; should she then call caution as if he were still her golden babe?

At length her eye fell upon Loki, who stood to the side, where Balder's blind brother Hodar sat, stony eyes wide and an eager smile on his mouth, trying with all his heart to know the details of Balder's joy. Summoning Loki, the god-queen waved her ladies back, and met the mischief-maker's bold gaze with a great pleading.

"I say this to thee myself, good Loki," she said quietly, "rather than send the message, that you may know it pains me. But I fear a mischief, and to think of mischief is to think of thee. No one loves Balder better than thee, and I believe it—yet I were happier with you gone from this hall. Indulge me, then . . ."

Something indescribable and ugly moved in Loki's bright eyes, yet he smiled. "Since you ask, lady," he said and turned away, adding arrogantly over his shoulder, "but do not command me, I shall go."

He sprang down the steps and out into the night.

Frigga drew her shawl of tiny feathers close about her and shivered. Her ladies, cooing like a cote, closed about her. For long moments they whispered to her and to each other, until her great kindness asserted itself and she began, in turn, to soothe them in their concern.

"I am weary and foolish," she said; "none knows better than I how safe he is. Yet . . ." She paused while the laughing god turned his back to a black-armored hero swinging a knobbed mace, and paled until the weapon slipped from the mailed hand in midstroke and crashed into the wall. "Yet will I be happier when this noisy childishness is done."

"But Lady Frigga—you missed nothing. Did not all the world promise not to harm him?"

"Whatever I missed matters not," Frigga said.

"Was there something, then?" asked a soft voice.

Frigga widened her eyes and turned to the woman, a stranger to her—but the halls were populous and this a great festival; folk had come from afar.

"Only the mistletoe," said Frigga comfortingly, and the other ladies laughed at the idea of the gentle mistletoe as a danger.

Later, the woman was gone from her side, and was seen kneeling by blind Hoder, to help him, with her words, see the action, it seemed. And Frigga was pleased, for she saw the blind god's head come up, and heard him laugh and cry out, "Balder! May I cast at thee?"

"Ay; I am fair game tonight!" cried Balder, and went to stand before his brother. "Here I am be-

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fore thee; may fortune favor thy aim!" he said mockingly.

Then Hoder rose, and raised his arm. The woman was seen to turn him a little, better to face Balder squarely. Then Hoder hurled the sprig of mistletoe that he held, and it pierced Balder's heart. Balder uttered one great cry, all astonishment and no fear, and he fell, and he died.

Dark Hela, ruler of the underworld Niflheim, took the murdered god hungrily, as one who had waited long aeons; and indeed she had. And when Balder's second brother Hermod came there at Frigga's bidding, to ransom Balder back, Hela yielded to this degree: that if every living thing would weep for him, she would surrender him, but if a single one would not mourn, then forever he would be Hela's.

Back Hermod came with the word, and indeed it seemed a simple matter, for already all creation wept, the midges keened, and great splashes of color dripped from the rainbow bridge.

Yet in Jotunheim dwelt a Giantess, a strange, ageless creature steeped in sorcery and locked away from the world. All around her was weeping, even the Giants finding the death of this one enemy more than they could bear. Yet she would not weep for him nor anyone.

"Balder? Balder? Let the dead stay dead. Only dry tears will ye get from me. I had no good from this Balder, nor will I give him good." And no other word would she say; and so was Balder's death sealed.

And who killed him? Who killed the bright one who had no enemies, who had done no ill? Who was capable of an act so monstrous, so useless and cruel?

The heartsick Hoder testified that the mistletoe, which he examined afterward, smelt of Giant.

Who, being part Giant, had access to Gladsheim?

The woman who had given the mistletoe to Hoder and urged him to throw it had disappeared. Who was she? Or—was it a woman? Who was the greatest of all adepts at disguise; who had once fought a battle with the god Herindal in the shape of a seal?

The answer to all these questions was the same: *Loki, Loki Loki.*

And Loki was found outside, not impossibly far from the gate whence the mysterious woman-thing had fled, still sparkling with anger at having been asked to leave the hall. No one had seen him nor knew what he had done since he left.

So he was brought in, and chained. He said he was innocent and no more than that. Since the blood-brother of Odin could not be slain, he was lowered into a foul pit; and above him was suspended a frightful serpent in such wise that its venom dripped on him. And he was doomed to hang there until Ragnarok.

Then a pall settled over Asgard.

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Frigga, when she could, spun her golden threads and was silent. Great Odin brooded, Tyr and Thor, without guidance or orders, cast war and thunder about the earth as the casual spirit moved them.

Odin's twin ravens, Hugin, who was Thought, and Munin, who was Memory, quarreled bitterly over the fact that Munin had taken unto himself the duty of reporting to Odin the events of that evil night, while Hugin felt it was his privilege.

They went their separate ways, and though they might have been recalled by a word from Odin, he had not the word, for he cared no longer what happened in the world of men, or indeed in his own house.

So indeed it seemed true that Balder was needed in Asgard, lest the mere shadow of Ragnarok settle over the Aesir and crush them before there could be a battle at all.

This is the story which was told and retold for more than seven thousand years, as men count time. This, for all that while, was the complexion of Asgard. There, for a million moments measured by drops of scalding venom, hung Loki. And this is the prelude to the prelude of Ragnarok.

III

Munin flew high, and higher, turning one bright eye and then the other to the frozen land below. He flew because he must seek, he sought because he could not forget: his name was Memory.

He remembered the days when he perched on Odin's shoulder, waiting to be sent to the world of men, waiting for the long, companionable flight back during which he reported to his fellow all he had observed. He remembered the pleasant homecomings, the rasp of Hugin's voice as the other raven told Odin of what they had seen.

And he remembered the night of Balder's death, and Hugin's infuriating silence, and his own croakings and bleatings as he reported what had happened in and around the fateful hall.

He remembered Hugin's brilliant black stare as he spoke on and on, and the total anger of that insulted bird. He remembered the countless years of loneliness and idleness since, and he had had enough.

Between two crags he saw a dark fir, and in its lower branches he discerned a swaying lump just different enough in shape from a pine-cone to be what he was looking for.

He folded his wings and dropped closer. Ay: no pine-cone had moldy feathers aquiver in the wind, an ivory beak pressed to a moulted breast too sparse to hide it.

He fluttered to the branch, worked his claws about amongst the close-set needles until he found comfort, and settled.

"Hugin," he said. "Hugin."

Slowly the scaly eyelid on his side opened, just far enough to

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identify the speaker. It closed immediately.

"Parrot!" spat Hugin; it was his first word in seven thousand years, as men count time.

"Hugin, old comrade . . ." Munin paused to collect himself, to remind himself that he had come here to renew his partnership with Hugin, and that he must under no circumstance let Hugin make him angry. "What has thee been doing?"

"What thee sees," said Hugin shortly, still not deigning to open his eyes.

"Ah, Hugin. Remember the times we've had, the—"

Hugin raised a warning claw.

"I remember nothing. I am not a foolscap, a storage shelf, a . . . a macaw like thee. I am Hugin and my name is Thought."

"Ahh. And what has thee been thinking for seven thousand years, as men count time?"

"Of thine inexcusable perfidy, lovebird. What else?"

"But surely . . . thought thee not of the old days, of the great flights we—"

"I've no truck with memories, as thee should know. There were more important things with which to concern myself."

"The death of Balder."

"I told thee," said Hugin in some irritation, and at last opening his eyes, "what it was I thought about."

"About *me?* About what I did that night, when thee closed thine eyes and had nought to say, with the very world cracking about our heads?"

"I had to *think!*"

Munin recognized, slowly, that Thought without Memory had indeed done nothing but turn over and over that last insult. For the first time he felt a great welling pity for his comrade.

"All those years . . . thinking about me," he said. "Ah, Hugin!"

"It was a great evil thee did me, Munin," said the other plaintively.

"Ay, it was," said Munin with some hypocrisy, which he immediately compounded with "I am a simple soul, friend Hugin, and do not understand exactly what the evil was, though I grant thee it was enormous."

"Thee conveyed those events . . . whatever they were . . . out of Memory, without Thought! This was never our way, Munin!"

"Ah, that I know. That I knew then, but never understood. Before that night, we had long hours of flight for your thinking. In the press of circumstance, when Balder died, there was time to speak only as things occurred. Tell me, Hugin, is not the relation of things exactly as seen—is that not speaking the truth? That is all I did."

"Ay, it is the truth, just as a mound of bricks is a mansion. Truths must be arranged, Munin."

"And arranged, they are a different thing?"

"They can be used for a different purpose."

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"I am a simple soul," Munin said again. "Could thee demonstrate the point for me, in such a way that I will understand and not insult thee again?—for I miss thee sore, Hugin," he added with a rush.

He saw Hugin softening visibly, and pressed his advantage. "I'll tell thee exactly what I reported to Odin that night. If thought can make of these events a total different from what memory itself yields, I shall believe thee truly, and never insult thee again."

"Agreed. And will thee then fly back with me to Odin and behave thyself properly, henceforth leaving the final reports to me?"

"Gladly."

"Then tell me these events from the beginning. You understand that I have been without memory for some while now."

"But never again!" said Munin heartily, and launched into an account of the events surrounding the death of Balder, from the god's awakening with the strange fear, to the imprisonment of Loki. "Thus are the guilty found and justly punished!" he finished triumphantly. "What has Thought to say on this?"

"Only that Loki is not guilty."

Munin stared at him in amazement. "I don't see that!"

"Don't see! Don't see!" jeered Hugin. "Know, parakeet, that thy two eyes are petty instruments which, at their best, are purblind. I have in here," he croaked loudly, overcoming Munin's approaching interruption, "a third eye which sees what you do not. *That* is what thought is for!"

"It cannot make me see what it sees," said Munin ruefully.

"It can in time," said Hugin. He sounded alive and in inexplicably high humor. "Come!" and before the puzzled Munin knew what was happening, he flapped skyward.

"Where are we going?"

"To Jotunheim."

"But Loki's in Gladsheim—or under it."

"Ay, But if he's innocent, some Giant is guilty, and Jotunheim's the place for Giants."

"But-but-but . . . thee don't *know* Loki's not guilty!"

"The ways of thought," said Hugin didactically, "are not those of observation and reporting. Thought is not limited to facts; facts are; thee will remember, but the bricks used to fill in a thinker's design."

And until they reached Jotunheim, he would say no more.

IV

As they sailed over the low, wide, forbidding city, Hugin asked, "The Giantess—she who refused to weep for Balder. Does thee know her name, and where she dwells?"

"Of course. She is Borga, a recluse and a small sorceress, and she dwells in yonder spire. But there is no connection, Hugin, between her and Balder or even Loki. I think—"

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"*I* think," said Hugin loftily, and led the way to the spire. They alighted on the roof, and Hugin said, "Ravens are great mimics, and among ravens, thee has special talent, no? Can thee imitate the voice of Loki?"

"That I can, to frighten Loki himself if I choose," said Munin, most startlingly in Loki's exact tone.

Hugin cocked his weather-beaten head to one side and said, also in Loki's voice, "This is but a poor imitation of thy talent, friend, but would it serve to baffle a Giant?"

"It baffles me," said Munin, awed.

"I thank thee for the lesson, then," said Hugin. His eyes sparkled in a way new to his fellow. "Now lead the way in some secret fashion which you, oh, Mimir among birds, surely know in this place, so that we may come upon the lady in her chamber unobserved."

Speechless with astounded pleasure, Munin crept to the crooked eave and along it to an odorous smoke-hole. Cautiously he put his head inside, and finding the firebed cold, gestured to Hugin.

Hugin passed him, whispering "*Silence!*" and inched into the room.

It was an almost circular turret room, fitted out as a combination bedroom and alchemical laboratory. Around it ran shelves filled with an inconceivable clutter of bins, bottles and bags, boxes, books and basins.

On the bed lay Borga, and Hugin croaked—but silently—in surprise. For by human standards she was exquisite; even among the Aesir she would have passed as attractive. Nay, as wondrously fair.

She was hardly the withered crone Hugin had expected. Turning from her, he edged along the shelf to which he had hopped. Coming to a large, long-necked flask which lay on its side, empty, he considered it critically, shifted it slightly so that its open mouth and neck almost paralleled the smooth wall. Then he thrust his beak into the flask, finding that there was just room for his jaws to open comfortably.

To do this, he had to lie almost on his side. He gestured with one claw for Munin to do likewise. Then, with an effect that made Munin's feathers all stand on end, he uttered a protracted and horrible groan, in an exact mimicry of Loki's voice. The sound of it as it emerged from the flask was most extraordinary. The wall's curvature made it seem to come from everywhere at once.

Borga left her bed in a way which challenged description. Levitation, the power of which she certainly possessed, seemed to play no part in it, but she came straight upward while still flat on her back. She rose in the air, fell back, bounced once, and landed cowering at the far side of the chamber. Her head whipped from side to side, as if she were afraid to leave

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it facing in one direction for more than the smallest part of a second.

"Wh-who . . . wh-what's that?" she quavered.

Hugin moaned again, and the Giantess seemed to shrink into herself.

Again she cast about wildly. "Where— Art here?"

"Nay; in Gladsheim," Hugin intoned. He then made a spattering-hissing sound, which was like hot fat dropping into a fire, followed by an agonized gasp. "Ai-ee, it burns . . . *it burns* . . ."

"By what magic—"

"How do I speak to thee? Largely through the holes in thy conscience, little sorceress. *Very* little sorceress," Hugin added scornfully. "I cannot come to thee; would that I could."

From that she seemed to take great courage. She rose and composed herself, and said in a voice more clear, "I have heard of thy torment, Loki, and I am sorry it is so extensive. But thee cannot deny that thee led thyself into it."

"But I am innocent!"

"To a degree," said Borga, and Munin, his awe renewed, nodded at Hugin. "But considering thy manifold sins, and the many that went unpunished, thee cannot claim complete injustice. And no one will believe thee! Tell me, whose fault is that, friend liar?" Her tone became increasingly confident and mocking. "Thee has interrupted my rest, good Loki. Why?"

"To . . . to tell thee . . ." Again that shocking hiss, and the gasp. "Did thee never love me, Borga?"

Now she laughed. It was not pleasant. "Well thee knows! I spurned thee always! Thee wanted not me. Thee wanted an amusement, something different—a sorceress who was a daughter of the Giant vizier."

Loki's voice said, slyly, *"Always?"*

She began to speak, then stopped, pale. "What do thee mean?"

Hugin laughed. It was chilling. "Did thee enjoy Balder?"

"How dare . . ." and then she was overcome by what seemed to be curiosity. "How did you know?"

"What let thee think Balder would notice such as thee?" Hugin jeered harshly. "Stupid! to lull thyself into believing Balder would court and cozen and bargain for such coarse flesh as thine! The veriest sparrow could have told thee about guileless Balder, were it not for thy blinding conceit!"

"But he did! He did!" she wailed. "And he made my head swim so . . . and he came so close, and then put me by and asked that of me that no Giant must ever share with the Aesir . . . and I refused, and closer again he came . . . and he said he loved . . . and I, I was lost, and I told him the Great Secret of Mimir, and then he took me, laughing . . ."

She burst into a wild weeping, which was drowned out by a cascade of coarse laughter, echoing round and round the room.

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While it still echoed, Hugin snatched out his beak and whispered to Munin, "Can thee mimic Balder?"

"Ay," said Munin, "but 'twould be a desecration!"

"Desecrate away, friend parrot. We have this pullet's neck on the block."

"What must I say?"

"Some Aesir love-making nonsense."

Munin put his beak into the jar, and Balder's voice, hollowed by the resonant glass, rang out: "Beloved, thy limbs glow, nay, they dazzle me. Hide thyself in mine arms quickly. I die, I wither away standing so near the sun . . ."

"Balder!" she shrieked.

On the second syllable Hugin had pulled Munin's beak out and thrust in his own, and was again making that jarring, jeering laughter. "Na, na, not Balder; Loki, who swore to have thee whether thee'd have him or not. Loki, who fought Herindal in the shape of a seal. Loki, who can take any shape he chooses—ay, and any sorceress! It was I, I, Loki ye bedded with, thinking it was Balder—ay, and ye enjoyed it, crone!

"It was I who stole thy Secret of Secrets, not Balder. And when next thee saw Balder, thee went to him mouthing and simpering, and thee took his honest innocence as a spurning. And for that thee killed him, that and for fear that he'd tell your Secret! Do you see what thee've done, thou thick-witted slut? Thee killed bright Balder for bedding thee when he did not; for spurning thee which he did not; and for possessing a Secret which thee never told him!"

She stumbled across to the bed and crouched on the edge of it, gasping as if she had been whipped. Slowly, then, she looked up, and she had a crooked smile on her face. She forced words out between her teeth:

"Then, Loki, for the crime I have done, I am free, and thee hang in the pit. For what thee led me to do, all the world accuses thee. Hang there, then; thy punishment is just!"

Hugin pulled out his beak and almost comically scratched his head with his claw.

Munin whispered, "What is this Secret?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I must think." He closed his eyes tight.

Munin was painfully reminded of the night Balder was killed, when Hugin went into this kind of trance and would say nothing until he had thought it all out. He glanced down. Borga the sorceress was waiting, breathing heavily.

Abruptly Hugin slid his beak into the jar again, and Loki's ghostly tones emerged. "The Secret . . ."

For a moment Borga was absolutely still. Then she flung her head up. "What of the Secret?"

Hugin said nothing.

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Borga whimpered, "Thee . . . thee haven't told the Aesir?"

Hugin intoned, "Think thee I have?"

"No," she whispered, "No, we . . . we would know. This is very . . . brave," she said with difficulty. "If thee told, they'd free thee."

"And come for thee," Hugin hazarded.

"Ay." She shivered. "If the Giants leave anything of me."

"So which is it to be, Borga?"

"I don't . . . understand."

Munin saw Hugin's eyes squeeze tight shut for a moment. Then he said, "I'll draw thee a problem, and thee may tell me if it is correctly stated. Stay in thy chamber for as long as thy safety lasts, and I shall assuredly tell the Aesir all I know. When the Giants hear of it they will kill thee. Or—"

"No!" she cried.

"Or," he went on relentlessly, "come to Gladsheim and confess to Odin that thee murdered Balder. I shall be freed and banished and thee will die."

"Either way, I die!"

"Ay. But there is this difference. Free me, and the Aesir never know the Secret. They will be content with their murderer. At least thee can make amends for thy stupidity without damage to the Giants."

She was silent a long time. Then she said, "Devil!" in a way which must have hurt her throat. After that, "When . . . when must I—"

"It will take thee three days to reach Gladsheim. On the fourth dawn from tomorrow's, I shall tell Odin the Secret or I shall greet thee. Choose."

She clutched her hands tight against her face for a moment, and then lowered them. She said calmly, "I will go, then."

She is brave, thought Munin. She is foolish and in some ways stupid, but she is brave.

But the Secret—the Secret; what of that? Munin looked anxiously at Hugin.

Hugin's eyes were screwed shut again. At length he said, in Loki's voice, "And when I am free, how can thee be sure I will not tell the Aesir our little Secret after all?"

"Thee wouldn't! Thy fealty's with us! Thee's a Giant!"

"Only half, Borga. Thee'll just have to trust me."

"Ay," she said, her expression cloaked, but her eyes hot, "we'll trust thee."

"Then farewell, Borga." And suddenly, in a strained tone, *"I have suffered enough!"*

Ay, thought Munin, that would be Loki's way. Always a flash of drama. He drew Hugin close. "What of the Secret? Can we learn it?"

In answer, Hugin pointed. Borga had moved to a table; she was drawing out a sheet of foolscap, a quill, ink. She sat down to write.

"To Omir, her father the Giant vizier," Munin whispered. With a bird's eye and more memories than the human race, he could read it

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easily. *"'This is goodbye, father, and a wish that I could be mourned, but I cannot. Know then that I was tricked by Loki in ways I am too ashamed to write here; that through this I, yes, I, father, killed Balder; and that I have done the greatest evil of all in revealing to Loki the Secret of Mimir. I go now to Gladsheim to die for the useless murder, and Loki will be freed. See that he dies, for he cannot be trusted. Do not pursue me nor change this plan in any particular, lest the Giants lose the field at Ragnarok.'"*

"Shall we take the paper?" whispered Munin when she had done.

"We need it not. Come." Hugin seemed about to burst with joy.

V

Silently they crept along the shelf to the fire hole and squirmed through it to the brooding night of Jotunheim. Together they took wing.

Ah, like the old days; to Odin, together! thought Munin joyfully.

"Thee have made thy point, good Hugin," he said, when they were over halfling country. "The facts I had never added up to the yield of your thought. How? How could you do it?"

"By flights above fact," said Hugin, "and the gathering of the facts below . . . Now, when first thee told me the story of Balder's death, thought took me to a path wherein Loki, though an instrument, was not actually guilty. Following this, I could assume that if Loki were innocent, the strange woman at the feast was not Loki disguised, but a stranger.

"What kind of stranger? A Giant, bearing some small charm to keep us from detecting her. You will, friend Munin, of course remember that she did not appear at the feast until Loki was cast out. He would have detected her, spell or no spell, half-Giant that he is. She stayed hidden, probably in the crowd.

"And we know, too, that she arrived to find Balder apparently invulnerable, and that she skilfully pressed Frigga to reveal her oversight with the mistletoe. The rest of this woman's work was seen by all."

"But," Munin objected, "how did thee conclude it was truly a woman?"

"Because at the outset it seemed a woman's crime. If a man is killed and has no known enemies, and especially if there is no obvious gain from his death, then the heart is involved somewhere.

"Balder, however, was not as other men, other gods. If he spurned anyone, it was in innocence and without intent, and the whole world knew that. Hence his death had to be for two reasons—because of a woman's scorn, and because of something else. It is easy to visualize a smitten lady killing herself over Balder; it is inconceivable that she would kill Balder unless something else were involved."

"What led thee to Borga?"

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"The noisiest clue of all, Munin. It was she alone who would not weep for him. This is one thing all Asgard overlooked because suspicion of Loki was so strong—just as all Asgard has forgotten that Loki wept.

"So once we were led to Borga, we had merely to let her conscience work in our favor. The voice of Loki in her room spoke never from knowledge, save what she supplied. And so we forced her to confess, and further, to give herself up."

"Thee, not we," said Munin reverently. "And what of the Secret?"

"We do not know it completely, but we know enough. Borga wrote, . . . *lest the Giants lose at Ragnarok.* And that is sufficient, from what thee've told me—it is word straight from the heart of the Giant domain that such a thing is possible, the first such since Odin entered the Well of Mimir the Wise, in the dawn of time."

"Mimir . . . he is a Giant!" cried Munin, fluttering excitedly. "And it must be one false seed he slipped amongst the treasures he gave Odin! And Odin—good Odin—never doubted it!"

"As was said by our false Loki," chuckled Hugin, "'*I have suffered enough!*' We shall take a weight from the sky-father, friend Munin. Perhaps he will wish to confront Mimir with the lie—that great tragic lie that the Giants must win the field at Ragnarok. But thought tells me he need not: Fate never dictated the doom of Asgard."

"Will Asgard be victorious then?"

"The Aesir will win if they fight best, and that is all they would ever wish."

Before them spread the frontiers of Asgard. Happily they flew—Munin, who bore seven thousand years of doom and mourning, seeing now a return to the great days, and Hugin, who bothered himself not with memories, content that hereafter he would be the one to speak to the sky-father.

* * *

Joy is now joy in Asgard, with its ale and its heady mead, the singing and the wild hard laughter. Clink and clatter and clash ring the arms; whip and whicker and thud, the arrows. Sinews are tuned and toned and honed and hardened, and speech is mighty, and much of the measureless night belongs to the unearthly yielding of the Aesir goddesses, whose limbs are magic.

Here are the heroes of Earth, here the dazzle-winged Valkyrs; here in the halls of forever they feast and fight and find that which mortality is too brief and too fragile to grant.

The Aesir are made for joy and the heroes have earned it, and their joys are builded of battle, and to battle they build. The battle they face is the battle of Ragnarok. They will fight the Giants at Ragnarok. They will dare death at Ragnarok . . .

. . . and there *they need not die!*

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in the still waters

by . . . Lester del Rey

The spaceship *Midas* was like the famed frigate, *Old Ironsides*—glorious to schoolboys, but with all of its banners furled.

ZEKE WATCHED the red light on the panel fade, then listened to the unnerving chatter of the relays as the ship searched its way back to its course. The pip on the screen had disappeared into a background of snow which the anti-noise circuits could no longer blank, even though the sun was a remotely blazing disk half the diameter of his thumb. He dropped his eyes to his hands that lay on the board, staring bitterly at the knuckles that were swollen with arthritis and covered with coarse hairs that had begun to turn grey.

Behind him, he heard Mary sigh softly. "Those blamed blowtorches," she said, but her voice was as tired as he felt, and the old anger at the smaller, direct-drive ships was almost automatic. "He might have looked where he was going."

"He did," Zeke told her. "There wasn't any danger, Mary."

She smiled at him, and he knew that she thought him the most capable of men—wise, resourceful, always in complete command of him-

Lester del Rey has scored so many science-fiction triumphs in the past few years that he deserves to be the recipient of some highly individualistic award. One labeled "For General Excellence," perhaps—with a few laurel leaves added tinted with the glow of worlds uncharted and unknown. For explore such worlds he will, as he has in a sense done here with this brilliantly perceptive story of a space veteran's heroic struggle to regain the dignity and the splendor of a career cut off in midstream.

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self and his ship. Why couldn't she understand that there really had been no danger? The blowtorch must have spotted the huge bulk of the *Midas* well in advance, for the great, new-model ships were equipped with radar systems which never missed.

He stared at his hands again. He'd known there was no need for an emergency blast, and had been reaching for the controls when the automatics went on. But, like the screen, age had let too much noise creep into the messages along his nerves. His fingers had reacted too late, and had fumbled, precisely as the *Midas* had done in over-blasting needlessly.

An old man, he thought bitterly, in an old ship. But lately it almost seemed as if he were growing old faster than the ship. Once, he'd liked it best when they were farthest from the planets. Now he'd found the trip in from Tethys tormentingly long and wearying. He was actually looking forward to berthing at Callisto where there would be no alarms to wake him from the fitful sleep of a man past his prime.

He heard the control-room door close softly, and knew that Mary had gone to make tea. Their habits had become as automatic as those of the ship, he thought with another twinge of bitterness. But he reached for his pipe and began filling it, unconsciously muttering the words that had become a symbol of their needs: "A good smoke and a pot of tea never hurt anyone."

If their boy, Allen, had lived, things might have been different. Zeke sighed heavily and got up, heading back for his regular tour of inspection before tea. As he passed the three other empty seats in the control room his weariness and despair increased.

Bates had died on Venus, Levitchoffsky had sold out to join a blowtorch company, and Ngambu had gasped out his life from a sudden stroke only three years before, leaving the *Midas* entirely to Zeke.

Somehow, it had been harder and harder to get younger men to replace the missing ones. Now he had become resigned to doing everything himself. He'd had years enough in which to learn since he'd first been taken into the group as head engineer.

He went back through the empty crew quarters, past the equally empty passenger rooms, and through the holds with their small loads of freight, until he came to the great engine that drove the *Midas*. There, for the first time that day, he relaxed. Elsewhere, the brightwork had long since dulled, but the huge fusion converter was the one thing he never neglected. It purred on smoothly, turning a trickle of the hydrogen in ordinary water into huge floods of power, and it gleamed with weaving lights and shadows under his approving glance.

They weren't building engines

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like that any more—not since the blowtorches had taken over. A complete blowtorch weighed far less than the seven thousand tons of power equipment the *Midas* carried, for Zeke's ship had been constructed when space craft had cost so much to build that their engines had been designed to last almost forever. The ship could fall to pieces around its fusion converter or he could be forgotten for countless generations before that nearly eternal source of power began to fail.

Then his brief, prideful satisfaction passed. Even the engine had one fatal weakness. Someone had to feed it and to give it a minimum of care. Once he was gone, the engine would die with him. With the blowtorches controlling the space lanes, nobody would be interested in an old ship, no matter how well the engine could convert hydrogen to power for the great ion blasters to hurl out in magnificent driving force.

Reluctantly, Zeke turned from the engine room, and proceeded on back toward the complexities of the driving tubes. He moved slowly now, putting the depressing task off as long as he could. The blast that had been wasted in trying to avoid the blowtorch had been too strong. Somewhere, some part of the controls had misfunctioned, and now . . .

It could have been worse. The drivers were still functioning, at least. But the imbalance that had been creeping up had become more pronounced and the strain of the needless correction had crippled the *Midas* more than a year of normal use could have done.

Zeke moved methodically about, avoiding enormous busbars and giant electronic parts in the huge but crowded section out of old habit. He could make up for the damage to some extent, by inhibiting the less worn sections. But it would be, at best, only a temporary expedient. The *Midas* was more than ever in need of drydocking and repairs. It could no longer be delayed.

Mary had the tea ready when he wearily opened the door of their cabin. She was bending over the small serving table, peeling the foil from a jar of candied fruit, but she straightened abruptly when she saw his face. "Is it bad?" she asked.

He nodded. He'd never been one to talk much, and with Mary it hadn't been necessary. "Shot!" he told her. "How much have we left?"

She found the bankbook, and handed it to him. With grim urgency he added the figure to the freight fee he'd collect at Callisto, and remembered that there was some insurance he could borrow against. But he knew it wouldn't be enough.

"Maybe Mr. Williams will give us something on account against next year's contract," Mary suggested. "You've never asked him for an advance before." She stared at

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him, the worry in her voice less for the ship than for him. "Zeke, why don't you lie down for an hour? It'll do you more good than the tea."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Can't," he answered. "I've too much figuring to do."

The *Midas* would need babying for its landing, with the drivers so badly out of condition, and the need embraced finding exactly the right landing orbit. And while he needed pampering just as badly because of his own condition, that particular kind of solace would have to wait.

There'd be time for that, maybe, after he talked to Williams.

II

It had been five years since Zeke had dropped into Callisto to discuss the last contract renewal with Williams, head of the Saturanus Mineral Corporation. Now, after resting from the long, cautious landing, he found Zeus City disturbingly changed. The exact nature of the change eluded him at first, but as he walked down Main Street it began to register.

Human coldness was the key.

The city itself was the same but for the first time in forty years he could walk for blocks without meeting a single man who recognized him. And there was a new look on the faces he passed. The old, wild expression of the spaceman had given place to a businesslike air he had never seen beyond Mars before.

At Saturanus, there were more changes. The receptionist was a young chit of a girl who kept him waiting for nearly half an hour before admitting him to the President's office. And then it wasn't Burt Williams who greeted him, but an official who was a complete stranger to him.

"Mr. Williams died three years ago, Captain Vaughn," the new President said. He hesitated a second, then stood up and held out his hand. "I'm Julian Hathaway. I used to be treasurer here, as you may remember."

Zeke had a dim memory of a far younger man, more relaxed and amiable. The middle-aged Hathaway wasn't exactly fat, but he'd added a solidity usually called respectable. Now he seemed vaguely uncomfortable.

"I suppose you came to collect what is still due on your contract, Captain Vaughn?" he asked.

Zeke nodded slowly. "And to discuss renewal," he said.

He was still adjusting to the change. He'd never been close enough to Williams to be seriously hit by the man's death, but all his figuring had been done in terms of the former president's friendliness and flexibility. He had no idea of how to broach an advance to this frigidly formal and guardedly polite stranger. Williams had always made it easy to talk to him, but . . .

Hathaway, fidgeted uncomfort-

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ably, clipping and lighting a cigar, and giving some seemingly quite unnecessary instructions to his secretary through the intercom. Then he reached into a drawer of his desk, and drew out what was obviously the former contract. He compared it with a sheet in front of him. Finally he shrugged, and cleared his throat.

"According to my figures," he said, "we owe you eight thousand, four hundred dollars, and thirty-one cents, plus a three-hundred-dollar retainer to the end of this month. I've already had a check made out. And there's a separate check for five hundred, since Mr. Williams had you listed on the employee roll. That means you're entitled to automatic termination pay in that amount after fifteen years. Here."

He passed over an envelope. Zeke fingered it open, and stared uneasily for a moment at the checks. Then his eyes snapped back to Hathaway.

"Termination? But—"

Hathaway looked more uncomfortable, but he nodded. "Unfortunately, we can't renew the contract, Captain Vaughn."

"But Williams told me—"

"I know. And I'm sure he meant to keep you under contract as long as you were in business. I don't know whether he ever told you, but he served for a year on one of the old ion-drive passenger liners, and he was quite sentimental about all ion-drive ships. He had contracts with five, in fact, at one time—though the other four have all been retired.

"But he had a constant fight with the stockholders over it. As a new president of the company, Captain Vaughn, I don't have the authority that he had."

"I don't get it," Zeke said. The man was practically telling him he'd been a charity case. And that made no sense. "I charged less than the blowtorches! And freight rates went up last year, too."

Hathaway looked like a man caught beating a dog. His voice was unhappy, but there was no uncertainty in it. "That's part of the reason. When the rates went up, Hermes Freight offered us a contract at the old rate, in return for exclusive rights. And since that represents an annual saving to the company of several million dollars, we couldn't turn it down. I'm sorry, Captain Vaughn, but it was out of my hands."

"Yeah." Zeke stood up slowly, putting the envelope with the checks into his pocket. He held out his hand, trying to smile normally. "Thanks, Mr. Hathaway. I'll get the *Midas* off the Saturanus section of the docks as soon as I can."

"No need to do that. Until the end of the month, your ship's technically entitled to berth there, and I'll see there's no trouble. Good luck, sir."

Hathaway shook Zeke's hand almost gratefully, and saw the older man out through the office and to

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the entrance. He was still watching as Zeke turned a corner two blocks away.

At the bank Zeke deposited the checks and inquired about his balance, hoping that Mary's records had been wrong. But he knew better, without the confirmation of the young teller. Then he headed back to the rocket field, avoiding the hotel where he and Mary had engaged rooms.

The *Midas* loomed up huge among the smaller blowtorches scattered about the field. They had never succeeded in building a blowtorch drive larger than the original, for the formidable technicalities involved in phasing more than one such drive had ruled out all possibility of multiple drive. Originally, the small ships had contained less than half the cargo space of the *Midas,* though they'd stepped up the efficiency until it was now about the same.

When the direct conversion of a tiny, intermittent fusion blast to propulsive drive had been invented, the spacemen had laughed at the ships designed for it. They had seemed little more than toys. And the inability to increase their power beyond certain limits had already been recognized. Obviously, with a few more improvements in the reliable, proven ion-drive and fusion motors, the tiny blowtorches would never have a chance.

Spacemen, Zeke now knew, had guessed right in everything but their knowledge of economics. The big power generating motors and the ion-drive could have been improved, and ships far better than the maximum for the blowtorches could have been built. But they never were. A ship like the *Midas* had cost over twenty million dollars to build. The huge motor alone had cost sixty percent of the total cost. And for the same monetary expenditure, forty of the direct-drive ships could be completed.

In every way except one, the ion-drive was more efficient. But that one way was the determinant. It wasn't economically efficient to tie up twenty million dollars and its interest when two blowtorches would yield the same return for a single million! The ship companies stopped contracting for ion-blast ships, and the progress that could have been made still remained only a possibility.

For a while, during the brief currency exchange flareup between Mars and Earth, when it had seemed that interplanetary war might occur, Earth had suddenly grown interested in the big ships again. The Government had bought them up, planning to arm them.

Then the war scare had blown over, and they had been dumped onto the surplus market, since no freight company was still equipped to use them. Bates and Levitchoffsky had scraped up the price of one, taking Zeke in as engineer and Ngambu as pilot with equal shares for their skills. A lot of other spacemen had done the same.

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But that had been forty years ago, and now apparently the *Midas* was the last of the old ships. Zeke had seen some of the others, scrapped on the outer planets, or blown up because the old engineers had died or quit. They just weren't training men now to service the big motors properly.

III

Zeke reached the ship finally and climbed slowly up the ramp. Forty years! He wondered how often he'd climbed that identical ramp, and then tried to remember how he'd felt ascending other ramps in his youth when he hadn't been compelled to pause and wheeze asthmatically before the last step, even on the light planets.

Callisto had been an outpost then, the point beyond which the big companies and the blowtorches dared not venture. Zeke and men like him had built the outplanet colonies and when the blowtorches could go no further ships like the *Midas* had been the lifeline for all colonization projects beyond Jupiter. Even now, there was an extremely realistic engraving of the *Midas* on the planet seal of Neptune.

And kids had wanted to grow up to handle such ships. They hadn't been able to land without a bunch of kids—and grown-up kids, too—streaming out to admire them, and to ask to go inside, to gasp in awe at the engines.

Now there was only the estimator from the repair company Zeke had consulted on landing. He was standing doubtfully in the main lock, and he swung quickly as Zeke came in.

"Oh, hello, Captain Vaughn. I was just coming to look you up. How soon would you want her rebuilt?"

The man's manner was brisk.

Zeke frowned. It was a foolish question, but it apparently wasn't meant for a joke. "As soon as possible, naturally. But—well, how much—"

"Impossible!" Now the estimator seemed to think Zeke was being foolish. He grinned doubtfully. "We don't keep stuff here to fabricate all this. In fact, you're lucky we've got a man who can handle the job. No other company this side of Earth would touch it. We'll have to send to Mars for scrap parts for some of it, and maybe get other parts specially tooled at Detroit. Look, you sure you want her drydocked?"

"How much?" Zeke asked again.

The man shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest idea. It will take three months to get estimates on the parts alone. In round numbers, maybe a million dollars for parts, plus shipping and labor—if you want a complete overhaul. A quarter of that just to work on what you've got wrong with the drivers, if we disregard minor defects. Your engine looks sound. And you might get by a few more years on the con-

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trols. Aren't you feeling well, Captain Vaughn?"

Zeke shook the man's hand off. He'd been foolish to think it could be done for what he had. With a bitter grin at himself, he took out his bankbook, and passed it over.

The estimator whistled.

"That's it," Zeke told him.

"Umm." The other stared at the older man, and then shrugged. "All right, I'll level with you, Captain Vaughn. I was padding it just a bit. I like a fat commission as well as the next. But I wasn't padding it *that* much. Not by a tenth!"

He pulled at one ear-lobe, staring about at the ship. Then he shrugged. "Maybe there's something we can do, though," he suggested at last. "We've got a few old parts, and we can jury-rig a little more. For twenty-five thousand, we can retune those drivers enough for you to pass take-off inspection here.

"Hell, since I'm one of the inspectors, I'll guarantee that. It should take us *maybe* two weeks. Then you can take the ship across to Venus. They're short of metal and paying top scrap prices. You could probably get enough for this outfit to pick up a fairly good used blowtorch—or to retire on. They jury-rigged a couple of scrapped ion-blasters on Earth and crawled across with them recently, so they must fetch a good price there. How's it sound?"

Zeke brought a trembling hand up to a big wrench on the wall. "Get off!" His voice was thick in his ears. "Get off my ship, damn you!"

"What the heck gives?" The inspector took a backward step, more as if humoring Zeke than in any fear. "Look, I'm trying to help you. You crazy, Captain?"

The brief anger ebbed back into the general dullness, and Zeke let his arm drop limply. He nodded. "I don't know. Maybe I am. I must be, landing on Callisto without finding they had take-off inspection now. All right, fix her up."

There was nothing else he could do, of course. It would leave him enough to buy supplies, at least. And fuel was no problem—he'd learned places to find frozen water years before, and the fuel tanks were nearly full.

But with the contract with Saturanus ended, getting freight enough to keep going was certain to be tough. If the *Midas* had been in top condition, he could probably get a fat contract for the new mines on Pluto, since it was hard to get blowtorch pilots who would stick to the long haul so far from any recreation.

But the mines wouldn't risk their ultra-precious ores without a full inspection of the ship. They'd turned him down five years ago. Now it was out of the question.

He headed back toward his hotel, trying to figure out what to tell Mary. She'd know he was lying, of course, but she'd feel better, somehow. Then he'd have to go looking

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for work. There had to be something.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," he quoted to himself, trying to believe it. Then he stopped. His mind found it too easy to twist what came next. Green pastures and still-waters! He might be old, but he wasn't ready to be turned out to pasture; nor was the ship going to be becalmed in still waters, out of the current, to rot and decay uselessly!

IV

The ship behaved slightly better on the take-off from Callisto. He'd been nervous about that, after watching the fumbling, sloppy work of the men. And Mary had her own worries, probably inspired by her contempt of anyone who would foul up the passageways without cleaning them. It had taken her hours, while he inspected the work, to restore the *Midas* to livable condition. But once beyond the planetary limits, they both breathed easier.

"I'll fix the tea, Zeke," she said. Then she smiled faintly. "He was such a nice young man. He was really concerned about us."

Zeke knew she was thinking of Hathaway, and nodded. He had to admit she was right. Hathaway couldn't get the contract renewed, but he'd done all he could, as it turned out. He'd come to their hotel to tell them he'd gotten them a small job for another minerals company, carrying an emergency inspector to Ceres.

The payment had been ridiculously low, but it was something, at least; and Hathaway had suggested there might be work for them on Ceres for a few trips. With the last of their money gone, the offer had saved them from utter disaster.

It had been their only chance, for Zeke had tried every employment office in Zeus City only to be told there was no work available for a wornout ion-blaster.

Hathaway had been almost a different man, as if a big load had been lifted from his conscience. He'd been as nice as Mary thought. Too nice, Zeke reflected bitterly. They were carrying a passenger now and making enough to pay for the trip, but he knew it was only because of Hathaway's charity. He'd won the job because the younger man had put on pressure to help him, and not on his own merits. Then he remembered that Williams had given him fifteen years of contracts, and that act of generosity, he now realized, had been almost charity on Williams' part!

He picked up his pipe and began filling it as he went on his routine tour of inspection. The door to the passenger cabin was closed, and he felt almost grateful, uncertain about how much the young engineer knew of the situation. He made his way back to the driver compartment, groaning again as he saw the shoddy workmanship that had been done.

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They hadn't even bothered removing the rust from salvaged parts. And he remembered that there had been no guarantee of the work's quality—only that the ship would pass take-off inspection. Just possibly the work would hold up for another year, but beyond that, it would probably fail with a complete finality. From ten feet away, he could detect heat still leaking from damaged insulation.

But there was nothing he could do. He'd been one of the best space-ship power engineers commissioned in his day. He could control the big generator to almost perfection, and could have taught its operation at any accredited school, or to any younger man who might have been willing to learn. But drivers were far too complicated for one man to balance, and he had no repair parts.

He shrugged, and turned back toward the huge engine, where the smooth flow of unceasing power would almost certainly soothe some of his worries. He was surprised to find Grundy, the engineer-passenger there, studying the bulk of the motor. The blond young man looked slightly embarrassed at being caught snooping.

"I had to take a look at her," he explained hastily. "I've never seen a fusion motor before. I meant to, while I was still on Earth. But it was always too much trouble getting into the sections where they are."

Zeke nodded. He'd heard that the projected fission motors for general use hadn't been built, since the solar-energy converters had been developed to near perfection. There were plenty of the fusion generators in existence, but they were confined to places where sunlight was unreliable. When a layer of solar-batteries could be sprayed on cheap cloth like paint, capable of extracting nearly a hundred percent of the energy of sunlight and when the new capacity-storage cells could handle several days' accumulation of power, why should men bother with gigantic machinery?

Of course, on the planets beyond Mars, sunlight was too weak. But there, the expense of freighting had made all but the biggest installations choose the much simpler and smaller uranium-fission power units, for it was cheaper to pay for uranium than to pay interest on a fission motor.

"Glad to show her to you," he told Grundy.

The engineer shook his head. "No, thanks. I just wanted to take a look. I already know the general theory. Too bad these things couldn't be built smaller and cheaper. With uranium getting scarcer and more expensive, it's making it tough on some of the settlements."

"You a power engineer?" Zeke asked.

"No, mining," the younger man answered. He gestured up at the *Midas*' creaking installations. "Wasn't this the same ship that Levitchoffsky was on when he found the

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uranium lode which gave him his start in building up Solar Freighting?"

Zeke nodded. It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough. Levitchoffsky had bought an asteroid claim from a passenger to Saturn who'd given up trying to live on its mineral deposits. Then when he and the others on the *Midas* had landed on the asteroid they had accidentally taken samples at just the right place, and discovered the Solar System's richest source of uranium. Levitchoffsky had promptly sold the claim to a speculating firm, and two years later, after he'd lost his profits in other worthless claims had disposed of his interest in the *Midas* and joined Solar Freighting.

The engineer stood around a few minutes longer, and then wandered back to his own cabin, more impressed with the fact that Zeke had known Levitchoffsky than with the *Midas* itself.

Zeke started to follow him, and then stopped. Levitchoffsky! Zeke hadn't been in touch with him for years, but the other would still remember him. He might be president of Solar Freighting and respectable now. But he wouldn't have forgotten. If he knew that Zeke was in trouble, he'd do anything he could to help.

Zeke dropped onto the base of the huge motor, carressing it softly as he thought it over. There were still scrapped ion-blasters on Earth, and men trained to work with almost anything of a technical nature. They could fix up the *Midas*—probably for a fraction of what it would cost on Callisto.

Then, with a ship like new, there was almost certain work at good rates on the Pluto run. If Levitchoffsky would lend him the money, he could probably pay it back in five years—even paying some younger man a high enough salary to entice him to help.

It wasn't an alternative he liked. It was trading on old friendship. But if he had to have help, he'd rather have it from Levitchoffsky than from anyone he knew. And it wouldn't really be charity. He was good for at least ten more years, with a repaired ship and some kind of help.

He was still considering when the alarm sounded harshly. One look at the auxiliary control panel in the engine room sent him running painfully back toward the driver section.

But it was all over before he reached it. The insulation on the main steering driver section had finally blown. It must have been over within microseconds as the searing ions blasted out and the lagging cut-off had deactivated that section. But the damage was beyond any hope of repair!

It was the section supposedly repaired on Callisto. Zeke couldn't tell whether it had blown because of defective work or because the greater relative strength of the newer parts had put too much strain

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on old sections. It didn't matter. Now he had only the emergency steering power left.

That was good for perhaps a couple of landings and take-offs, if he nursed it. After that, the *Midas* was through.

Zeke sighed in bitter despair.

There was no longer any doubt. Once he reached Ceres, he'd have to cable Levitchoffsky. And now that it was settled beyond a doubt, he began to wonder. Thirty years is a long time. The young man he'd known would have done anything for him; but he'd seen others change with prosperity and time. He suddenly wondered whether Levitchoffsky would even accept the collect cable.

V

Zeke was lucky that the little planetoid had so low a gravity. He was able to conserve on his use of the auxiliaries, without too rough a landing. He sat recovering from it and watching the engineer go hastily down the ramp. The young man must have been angry at the jolting, from the way he walked. But if he'd known it, he was lucky to be in one piece.

The field looked bleak. Ceres had been a regular stopping place for the *Midas* once, but that had been long ago. He had remembered it as a beehive of activity, bustling with the business of its great germanium mines. Now the field seemed deserted, and the great warehouses were dark in the faint light of the sun.

And it seemed even gloomier when Zeke stepped out of the *Midas* and headed toward the cable office. As he passed nearer the line of warehouses, he saw a few men moving about, but it was not comparable to the feverish activity of two decades before. Behind them, the processing mills were busy, with the little trucks hard at work. But there was none of the gaiety he had associated with busy miners. And a glance at the loads they were carrying explained why.

Low-grade ore! Even the fabulous mines here were wearing out. He'd heard a rumor that they'd suddenly come to the end of the rich stuff, but he had been reluctant to believe it. Now he could see with his own eyes that it was true.

Ceres probably had enough low-grade ore to supply the colony's needs for generations, but its commercial greatness had been built on nearly pure ore, and this seemed a starvation diet by contrast.

The tragedy seemed even worse than the circumstances warranted, however. Few lights were on, and he saw men in one of the stores wearing heavy clothes, as if they were conserving on heat. If there were a smiling face among the fifty thousand inhabitants of the planetoid, Zeke had yet to find it.

Even the air in the plastic bubble that covered the town seemed old and weary. Zeke shivered, realizing how cold it had become. But it was

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more than the coldness that increased the ache of his joints. Age had crept up on him and the *Midas* and now seemed to be pressing down on even the worlds he had known, as if the whole universe was running down, sinking by slow degrees into the stagnation of senility.

Age should be a period of peace and contentment—the still waters the Psalm mentioned, where everything was calm and serene. But here, as on board the *Midas,* the stillness was stagnation and decay, like a pool left behind the flood, when the current has ceased.

His steps lagged as he neared the cable office, partly from the general gloom surrounding him and partly from something else. Damn it, it wasn't really charity he was asking of Levitchoffsky. He repeated it to himself, but he couldn't quite believe it.

Here and there he recognized a store, but he felt no desire to go in. Even if the same men owned them, they would have changed too much since he'd known them, as Levitchoffsky might have changed. Grim of aspect, he continued on.

Then a sudden friendly greeting swung him slowly around.

"Zeke!" The man was grey and bearded, and at first Zeke didn't recognize him. Then his memory turned up the face in younger form, strong and confident, the eyes brimmed with a boastful arrogance. It was Aaron Cowslick, who'd been Ceres' chief blacksheep and general hellraiser. They'd been on binges together often enough, before Zeke had married and quieted down.

"Well!" The man caught Zeke's hand, and now he recognized the scar over the left eye, won in a tavern brawl.

"I wondered, when the *Midas* dropped, whether you'd still be on her," Aaron exclaimed, his handclasp tightening. "I thought you'd died long ago. We missed you around here. How are you, Zeke?"

Zeke tried to shake off his gloom, cursing himself for not thinking to look Aaron up. "Well enough," he lied, feeling sure the companion of his youth knew better. "How does it happen you're not in jail."

Aaron laughed, his dark eyes flashing. "I run the jail, Zeke. I'm mayor here!" At Zeke's incredulous expression, his grin widened. "Nothing stronger than coffee now, and the doc tells me to cut down on that."

He grabbed one of Zeke's arms and began leading him toward a little restaurant. Zeke felt almost grateful for the stop. And when the coffee arrived, it helped dispel some of the cold. He sat sipping it, while Aaron ran through all the anticipated questions. He tried to answer them casually, but the truth must have been obvious.

The mayor sighed, and pointed outside. "It was a great time, when the *Midas* was still full of fire and fury and this town was booming." He stared out, his face losing all its expression. "Don't lie to me,

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Zeke, and I won't try to deceive you. It's bad. Unless young Grundy sends back the right message to his company, we're in serious trouble."

"The mines?" Zeke asked.

"The mines. One of our men thinks he's found what may be a formation that would lead to a rich lode. I wish I could believe it. We've about reached the end of the rope. We can't cut down on power much more, and uranium is going higher and higher. That last discovery on Neptune turned out to be a bust—just a freak pocket. Now they've raised the ante on U-235. We can't afford enough to keep going. And without sufficient power on a world like this, we can't do anything.

"Food, water, air—it's all U-235 to us. Besides, the processing plants need more power for—low-grade stuff than for the high-quality ore. Even if we could afford the uranium, we'd still have to run our power plant too hot, and it wouldn't last forever. Looks like you might have some business if you're cheap enough."

"Resettlement?" Zeke asked.

The other nodded soberly. "Exactly. Vesta Metals says we can be split up among the Trojans—they've got booming mines there. If we can pay passage for ourselves and what we have to take, they've offered work and housing. We may have to take it, too."

"I can't take you," Zeke told him. He sucked at the last bit of coffee, then put the cup down heavily. "Steering drivers are shot, Aaron. Even your young Grundy is going to have to get back to Callisto on the first blowtorch that comes along. Until I get repairs, I can't risk carrying passengers or freight."

The mayor seemed almost relieved, though his voice was sympathetic. "I guessed it might be like that when I saw Mary," he said. "Well, it'll all work out somehow. We'll have to get together for dinner at my place. My wife's a first-rate cook."

"Bring her out to the *Midas* for a return engagement then," Zeke suggested. "We've still some Martian turkey in the freezer. Bring the whole family, if you've got kids." He waited, smiling, for a reply.

Aaron grinned. "One—a girl. She teaches school here. Which reminds me, when she heard there was an ion-blaster landing here, she got all set to descend on you with her class. She's never had a chance to show them a ship like that. Okay?"

"Sure," Zeke said automatically. "What time does the cable office close, Aaron?"

A glance at Aaron's watch assured him he had just time enough. He shook hands with the mayor again, almost relieved to drop back into his own thoughts. Normally, a chance to relive the old days would have been a gift from the blue. But right now he didn't want to be reminded of all the years that had passed.

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VI

Inside the cable office, a girl took Zeke's cable slip and frowned when she saw the check in the collect square. She glanced over it, came to his signature, and stopped to look up quickly.

"Captain Vaughn?"

He nodded.

"There's a message here for you. It came two days ago and we've been holding it. From Mr. Levitchoffsky! Maybe you'd better read it first."

Zeke stared at the envelope in blank amazement for a second, before the mystery resolved itself. Mary, of course! She must have sent a cable to Levitchoffsky during the dark weeks of uncertainty on Callisto, probably warning the man not to let Zeke know she'd cabled. She had known him, of course, and thought of him long before Zeke did.

He ripped the envelope open with trembling fingers. It was a long cable, obviously sent with no regard to cost. Zeke skimmed over the cover-up for Mary—how Levitchoffsky had been trying to get in touch with him and had finally heard of his landing and trouble on Callisto.

It was enough to know that the man was obviously filled with the same friendship he'd had so long ago, enough to know that the words carried a genuine delight at being in touch again. Then he came to the important part.

"I'd like nothing better," the message went on, "than to put the old *Midas* back in shape. What a ship she was! But aside from getting a pig-headed man like you to let me do it, there seems to be no way. The only place where the necessary shops and skilled work can be found is right here on Earth. And since one of those taped-together scrap jobs broke up on the way to Venus, inspection here won't let another ion-blaster land. I've tried getting them to wink at the law, but it's no dice.

"Anyhow, I'm sending my private blowtorch to Ceres on the double. Get back here where the money grows on the trees, Zeke. I've got a top job wide open beside me. I needed a good engineer I could trust for years and couldn't find one. It's all yours, and I don't have to tell you how glad I'll be to see you and Mary again."

Zeke dropped the cable onto the desk and stood gazing at it without seeing it. The girl waited inquiringly.

"Will there be any answer?" she asked. "It's to go collect, unlimited."

He shook his head and started for the door. Then he changed his mind. He had to answer, of course.

But it was hard work inventing the words to explain about the repairs being good enough for him to get the job on Pluto. Lying wasn't easy for him. And nothing could have stopped Levitchoffsky, obviously, if he'd known the truth.

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Later he sat in the control room with Mary while she read and reread the message and his copy of the answer. At last, she put it down.

"It's good, Zeke," she assured him. "I think he'll believe it."

He ran his hands over the controls, cutting on the panel lights that seemed too dim, as if the bulbs were about to fail. Under them, the hair on the back of his hands seemed more grizzled than ever as he filled his pipe.

"Maybe he did need an engineer," he said at last.

"Maybe," she agreed. Then she reached a hand out for his. "It was a good cable you sent him, Zeke."

From below, there was the sound of Grundy gathering his things together. The news that Zeke had no intention of taking off again had sent him into a rage. But when Zeke had shown him the ruined drivers he'd turned white and apologized. Now his steps started for the ladder to the control room, then hesitated.

"He's still upset," Mary said.

Zeke went to the door. "Sorry, Mr. Grundy," he called down. "Maybe you won't have to wait long. I hear there's a blowtorch coming here in a couple of days. How were the mines?"

He'd meant to ask the question before, but it had slipped his mind.

Grundy grunted in disgust. "Rotten. The lode's completely shot, and there's not a thing my company can make any advances against. Why?"

"I was just curious," Zeke answered. "Well, so long."

He shut the door and watched Grundy carrying his suitcase across the field, noticing that the pickup on the rear telescreen was growing weak. But that wouldn't matter now.

Forty years, he thought again. Forty years while he and the old *Midas* earned their way and helped to keep men moving out to new frontiers. Now they had grown old together, and some of those frontiers were old and ready to be abandoned.

"There's still Venus," he said slowly. "I guess we could retire on what she'd bring for scrap. And it wouldn't be charity."

Mary nodded, but said nothing. Then she shook her head, and he sighed in sudden relief.

"We won't retire," he said.

Above them, the sky was the black of space, with the hot pinpoints of stars burning through it. Zeke had read stories in his youth about ships that would someday cross the immense distances that separated the Solar System from the nearest of those stars. But so far, nobody had found a drive that would make that vision resplendently possible during the span of one lifetime.

He'd even imagined that he might be on such a ship, when he'd been young and foolish. And now, maybe, he was old and foolish. Maybe a man began to get crazy notions when he was old. But what

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was crazy about it? There was nothing else, quite so sane.

"Mary," he told her quietly, not knowing how to discuss it, "you married a fool."

She followed his gaze upwards, and made a funny, choking sound in her throat. Then, surprisingly, he saw her smile. "As long as a couple of fools stick together, Zeke, I guess it doesn't much matter, does it?"

And somehow, it was settled. Zeke reached for the big power switch and cut it on. From below there was the instant soft murmur of the great engine, eager as always to go, unmindful of the weakness of the failing, aged drivers. He stretched out his hands toward the controls, and then stopped.

VII

Below, on the field, the failing screen showed a group of people coming up under the big ship and heading for the ramp that he hadn't yet lifted. Zeke couldn't take off with them in the path of the blast.

His legs trembled slightly as he stood up, but he reached the lock before they were up the ramp. In the glow of the *Midas'* morning light he saw a young, rather pretty woman with a group of perhaps thirty boys and girls following her. And behind the children came Mayor Aaron Cowslick.

The mayor heaved his way up, puffing a little. "Meet my daughter Ruth," he said, proudly nodding toward a shy, and rather pretty little girl who came forward hesitantly. "Did you hear about the mines?"

Zeke nodded. "I heard. Rotten luck, Aaron."

"It's hardest on the kids. The word leaked out, and they got wind of it this afternoon. It's always tough on kids when they've grown up on one world, and suddenly find they've got to get out. Ruth thought they might be cheered up a bit if you'd let them go through a genuine ion-blaster. They've been as excited as jumping beans all the way here."

"Bring them in," Zeke said, smiling. It had been a long time since he'd been a kid, aching for a chance to get into a real ship. But he could remember some of it. In their case, though, he supposed it would be like going into the pages of an historical novel to investigate a real pirate ship.

"Mary's up topside, if you'd like to join us," he said. "And don't worry—they won't hurt anything."

"I'll show them around. I've read up on these ships," Ruth told her father and Zeke. "Dad, you don't have to come."

Aaron breathed an obvious sigh of relief, and followed. But from below, there came the sound of yells of excitement that couldn't be blotted out. He had a picture of the young woman filling the children's heads with nonsense and misunderstanding. How could she answer their questions when she

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had no first-hand knowledge of ships and the men who piloted them?

At last he stood up and went down again, leaving Aaron with Mary. Once, other kids had swarmed around the *Midas,* when everything except the children had been younger. If this had to be the last time, the old ship was going to be handled proudly and justly!

And it would have to be the last time. He'd been working it out as the minutes slipped by. They could risk one more landing and take-off, out on the wastes of Pluto. There was buried ice there that could be used to fill the fuel tanks and the cargo holds—enough to power the *Midas* for two years of steady drive, or a year with sufficient power left to operate her equipment indefinitely.

And on board was a store of food that would last for a long time, if they used the products of the air-replenishing hydroponics tanks to supplement it. Enough, certainly, to keep two old people until death found them naturally.

It wouldn't be suicide, after all. They'd go further out than any ship had ever gone before, and after they died, the *Midas* would coast on forever, or until she reached some star system that could trap her. She'd go on and on, and there was no known limit to the frontiers she might reach. Her steering drivers were shot, but the main drivers were all she'd need to build up an unthinkable speed.

There would be no still waters. Instead, there'd be what Tennyson had called "such a tide as moving seems asleep, too deep for sound and foam . . ."

He had almost reached the great engine compartment before he stopped to collect himself, wondering what nonsense Ruth would be telling the children.

Then he blinked in surprise. Amazingly, she'd gotten her facts correct. She was trying to answer every sensible question they asked, and making a good job of it.

He stood listening, nodding with approval. Most of her knowledge *hadn't* come from books. She was repeating his own words, quoting him, as Aaron must have done many times in the past.

"As much power as a uranium plant?" an eager twelve-year-old asked.

"More," she told him. "More than two plants like the one we have. And a lot bigger, as you can see. Why, one of the ships the spacemen call blowtorches couldn't even lift a power plant like this. It has to be powerful, just to lift its own weight."

"Boy!" It was a piping masculine voice, filled with awe. Zeke could see the boy, staring up at the huge motor, touching it with an almost reverent finger. "Boy, I wish they still used this kind of ship. Then I'd be an engineer. I'd sure like that!"

Zeke watched him touch the motor again, and the great power plant

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seemed to purr under his fingers, as Zeke had fancied it purred in response to his own ministrations. Zeke's eyes began to shine.

He turned softly toward the control cabin, no longer worried about what Ruth would tell them.

Aaron and Mary were still sitting in the semi-darkness, but they turned as he came in. He walked to the control board and cut off the panel lamps, turning on the main dome light. He didn't need darkness now as he swung to face them.

"Aaron," he asked quietly, "if I landed this ship in a good, school ground locality, do you reckon your engineers could help me hook your power lines to the big engine that's now going to waste? And do you think you could use a good engineer to teach some of your youngsters how to handle fusion engines?"

It was the only answer, of course. He had a motor that would work for a thousand years at least, at almost no cost for fuel; and Ceres had everything except the power such a motor could supply. It was economically inefficient, of course, to consider using such motors today. But sometimes, courageous age was more important than economics, whether on worlds, or in the minds and hearts of men.

He saw surprise give place to slow understanding. Mary beamed at him through the tears that were suddenly coursing down her cheeks, and Aaron came to his feet with a celerity surprising in a man well past his first youth.

He nodded, and his hand reached for Zeke's. "We'll always be able to find a use for good men, Zeke," he said.

They would be in still waters, after all—settling into one place on a quiet little world old enough to have lost its roughness. But not all waters had to be stagnant, once the current had passed. Some could be serene, useful—and wanted!

FOR YOUR ENTERTAINMENT
IN NEXT MONTH'S—ONLY 30 DAYS TO WAIT—ISSUE

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A LADY IN SATIN by IRVING E. COX, JR.

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the grown-up people's feet

by . . . Robert F. Young

In Laurie's eyes was the strange bright wonder which children know when life is new. Then came the darkest of human awakenings.

THERE ARE THINGS we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

It was late in September of that last year, and Mary Ellen had driven in to town to pick me up from work. She pulled over to the corner of Main and Central where I was waiting and I got into the car. Laurie was standing on the front seat, her blue eyes enormous with the marvel of a new discovery.

"Dad, I can read!" she shouted the moment she saw me. "I can *read* now Dad!"

I pinched her button nose but she hardly noticed. She had a small red primary reader in her hands, opened to a brightly colored picture of a little girl in a swing with a little boy pushing her. Beneath the picture was a series of short paragraphs in large clear print.

"Listen to me, Dad! Listen: 'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John!' "

"What do you think of our little

All parents live to some extent in their children and see the future through eyes that have never looked upon the disasters which human adults scatter so ignorantly and cruelly over green hills and shining valleys and splendors mistily remote. But what if children's eyes grow dim or a young voice falters for lack of knowledge? What if books and human wisdom turn as sere as the crisping leaves of autumn. This may well be Robert Young's most human story.

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Edna St. Vincent Millay?" Mary Ellen said, watching the red light.

"I think she's just wonderful!"

The light turned green and we went up the big hill that led out of the little town on 30. It was late in September, as I said, but the hills and the fields along the highway were still brushed with the faded green of summer and the sky was hazily blue. Houses were a washed white and the violet shadows of elms and maples made unpremeditated patterns on close-cropped lawns. An empty tandem rumbled past us, touching the shoulder and whirring up a cloud of dust.

" 'Oh, look at Jane. Oh, look at John.' "

"You can read 'Bed in Summer' to *me* now, Laurie," I said.

She looked up from the book. I still can't forget the way her eyes were. They made you think of deep blue lakes with the sun sparkling in them for the first time.

"Sure, Dad," she said. "I'll read it to you."

Mary Ellen turned off 30 and started up our road. "Don't you think Stevenson might be a little difficult for her, dear?"

"Oh, no," Laurie said. "You don't understand Mother. I can *read* now!"

"You can help her over the rough spots, Mary L.," I said . . . "What's for supper, by the way?"

"Roast beef. It's still in the oven." She turned into the drive and braked by the forsythia bush.

Our house was on a rise and you could look down and see the highway with the cars hurrying back and forth like busy metallic beetles. Beyond the highway there was a fine view of the lake. On clear days you could see Canada. It was hazy that day though, and all you could see was the milky blueness of the lake interblending with the misted blueness of the sky. An intermittent wind kept rustling the big maples in the yard.

I got the evening paper out of the roadside tube, went over to the verandah and sat on the swing. Laurie was already there, the primary reader opened on her knees. We drifted gently back and forth.

" 'I see Jane,' " Laurie read. " 'I see John.' "

The wind kept ruffling the paper, making the headlines crawl. They were concerned with the bomb, as usual. Beneath them was the same old dismal story of potential megaton and potential megadeaths. After awhile I let the paper slip from my hands and listened to Laurie and the wind, and the sounds Mary Ellen was making as she set the dining room table.

I can still hear the pleasant clatter of dishes, and I can still hear the soft rushing sound of the wind; but most of all I can hear Laurie's sweet child's voice saying over and over: " 'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John . . .' "

A boy and a girl and a bomb, and presently Mary Ellen calling, "Come to supper!"

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What I remember most, though, was the last light of day, and the three of us sitting on the porch swing. Laurie sat in the middle, a *Child's Garden of Verses* on her lap, opened to "Bed in Summer."

" 'In—' " she read.

" 'In winter,' " Mary Ellen prompted.

" 'In winter I get up at night—' "

" 'And—' "

" 'And dr—' "

" 'And dress by yellow candlelight.' "

" 'In—' "

" 'In summer, quite the other way—' "

" 'I have to go to bed by day!' "

"Why that's wonderful, darling. 'I have—' "

" 'I have to go to bed and see the—' "

" 'birds still hopping—' "

" 'The birds still hopping on the tree—' "

" 'Or hear the—' "

" 'Or hear the grown-up people's feet—' "

" 'Still going—' "

" 'Still going past me in the street—' "

* * *

As I say, there are things we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

Laurie is a big girl now, but she does not know how to read. There would be little point in her knowing how since there is nothing to read. But once upon a time she could read a little bit, though of course she has forgotten how by now and perhaps it is just as well. There is no need for the printed word in the simple village we have built here in the hills, far from the radioactive shore of the lake; there is need for nothing here except strong backs that will not tire after long hours in the fields.

The long winter nights are empty, of course, and at first thought it might seem that books would help to fill them; but the books would be old books and they would only fill the nights with the past, and the past is better the way it is, half-forgotten, a way of life we are not quite sure we experienced at all—except for those little things we keep remembering, sitting before the hearth, the wind howling in the bitter darkness outside, shrieking in the distances as it scatters the ashes of cremated cities over the barren land.

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the last trump

by . . . Isaac Asimov

To be resurrected suddenly from an age-long sleep might prove worse than fire and torture—if the dead should remember too well.

THE ARCHANGEL Gabriel was quite casual about the whole thing. Idly, he let the tip of one wing graze the planet Mars, which, being of mere matter, was unaffected by the contact.

He said, "It's a settled matter, Etheriel. There's nothing to be done about it now. The Day of Resurrection is due."

Etheriel, a very junior Seraph who had been created not quite a thousand years earlier as men counted time, quivered so that distinct vortices appeared in the continuum. Ever since his creation, he had been in immediate charge of Earth and its environs. As a job, it was a sinecure, a cubby-hole, a dead end. But through the centuries he had come to take a perverse pride in the world.

"But you'll be disrupting my world without notice," he protested.

"Not at all." Gabriel's tone was emphatic. "Certain passages occur in the Book of Daniel and in the Apocalypse of St. John which are clear enough."

To transmute a theme as awesome as this into the golden, dancing motes of laughter cosmically dispersed throughout Space and Time requires imaginative dexterity of a high order. To turn that laughter into misty bright webs of lyricism, irony, compassion and the mystery and strangeness which will be in all things until the end of Time requires in addition a very great delicacy of perception. It is both of these qualities and their free exercise which has made Isaac Asimov a really great science-fantasy writer.

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"They are? After having been copied from scribe to scribe? I wonder if two words in a row are left unchanged."

"There are hints in the Rig-Veda, in the Confucian Analects—"

"Which are the property of isolated cultural groups which exist as a thin aristocracy—"

"The Gilgamesh Chronicle speaks out plainly," Gabriel pointed out.

"Much of the Gilgamesh Chronicle was destroyed with the library of Asshurbanipal sixteen hundred years before my creation."

"There are certain features of the Great Pyramid and a pattern in the inlaid jewels of the Taj Mahal—"

"Which are so subtle that no man has ever rightly interpreted them."

Gabriel said, wearily, "If you're going to object to such irrefutable historical evidence, there's no use discussing the matter. In any case, *you* ought to know about it. In matters concerning Earth, you're omniscient."

"Yes, if I choose to be. I've had much to concern me here and investigating the possibilities of Resurrection did not, I confess, occur to me."

"Well, that was your mistake. All the papers involved are in the files of the Council of Ascendants. You could have availed yourself of them at any time."

"I tell you all my time was needed here. You have no idea of the deadly efficiency of the Adversary on this planet. It took all my efforts to curb him, and even so—" Etheriel gestured dispairfully.

"That I can understand." Gabriel stroked a comet as it passed. "Lucifer does seem to have won his little victories. I note as I let the interlocking factual pattern of this miserable little world flow through me that this is one of those setups with matter-energy equivalence."

"So it is," said Etheriel.

"And the inhabitants are playing with it."

"I'm afraid so."

"Then what better time for ending the matter?" asked Gabriel.

"I'll be able to handle it, I assure you. Their nuclear bombs will not destroy them."

"You're taking a great deal for granted. Suppose you let me continue, Etheriel. The appointed moment approaches."

The seraph said stubbornly, "I would like to see the documents in the case."

"If you insist," said Gabriel.

The wording of an Act of Ascendancy appeared in glittering symbols against the deep black of the airless firmament.

Etheriel read aloud: "It is hereby directed by order of Council that the Archangel Gabriel, Serial Number et cetera, et cetera—well, that's you, at any rate—will approach Planet, Class A, number G753990, hereinafter known as Earth, and on January 1, 1956, at 12:01 P. M., using local time values—" He finished reading in gloomy silence.

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"Satisfied now?" Gabriel asked.

"No, but I'm helpless."

Gabriel smiled. A trumpet appeared in space, in shape like an Earthly trumpet, but its burnished gold extended from Earth to Sun. It was raised to Gabriel's glittering beautiful lips.

"Can't you let me have a little time to take this up with the Council?" asked Etheriel desperately.

"What good would it do you? The act is countersigned by the Chief and you know that an act countersigned by the Chief is absolutely irrevocable. And now, if you don't mind, it is almost the stipulated second. I want to be done with this as I have other matters of much greater moment on my mind. Would you step out of my way a little? Thank you."

Gabriel blew, and a clean, thin sound of perfect pitch and crystalline delicacy filled all the universe to the farthest star. As it sounded, there was a tiny moment of stasis as thin as the line separating past from future, and then the fabric of worlds collapsed upon itself and matter was gathered back into the primeval chaos from which it had once sprung at a word.

The stars and nebulae were gone, the cosmic dust, the sun, the planets, the moon—all, all, all except Earth itself, which spun as before in a universe now completely empty.

The Last Trump had sounded.

In the emptiness its clarion echoes seemed to mock eternity.

II

R. E. Mann—known to all who knew him simply as R. E.—eased himself into the offices of the Billikan Bitsies factory and stared somberly at the tall man—gaunt but with a certain faded elegance about his neat gray mustache—who was bending intently over a sheaf of papers on his desk.

R. E. looked at his wrist-watch, which still said 7:01, having ceased running at that time. It was Eastern Standard Time, of course; 12:01 P. M. Greenwich time. His dark brown eyes, staring sharply out over a pair of pronounced cheekbones bored into those of the other.

For a moment, the tall man returned his stare blankly. Then he said, "Can I do anything for you?"

"You are Horatio J. Billikan, I presume? You own this place?"

"Yes."

"I'm R. E. Mann and I couldn't help but stop in when I finally found someone at work. Don't you know what *today* is?"

"Today?" The tall man looked bewildered.

"It's Resurrection Day."

The tall man's surprise subsided. "Oh, that!" he said. "I heard the blast. It was fit to wake the dead. Wake the dead! That's rather a good one, don't you think?" He chuckled for a moment, then went on. "It woke me at seven in the morning. I nudged my wife. She slept through it, of course. I al-

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ways said she would. 'It's the Last Trump, dear,' I said. Hortense, that's my wife, said 'All right' and went back to sleep. I bathed, shaved, dressed and came to work."

"But why?"

"Why not?"

"None of your workers have come in."

"No, poor souls. They'll take a holiday just at first. You've got to expect that. After all, it isn't every day that the world comes to an end. Frankly, I'm just as well satisfied. It gives me a chance to straighten out my personal correspondence without interruptions. The telephone hasn't rung once."

Billikan stood up and went to the window. "It's a great improvement. No blinding sun any more and the snow's gone. There's a pleasant light, a pleasant warmth. All in all, a very good arrangement. But now if you don't mind, I'm *rather* busy, so if you'll excuse me—"

A great, hoarse voice interrupted with a "Just a minute, Horatio," and a gentleman, looking remarkably like Billikan in a somewhat craggier way, followed his prominent nose into the office and struck an attitude of offended dignity which was scarcely spoiled by the fact that he was quite naked. "May I ask why you've shut down Bitsies?"

Billikan looked faint. "Good Heavens," he said, "it's Father. Wherever did you come from?"

"From the graveyard," roared Billikan, Senior. "Where on Earth else? They're coming out of the ground there by the dozens. Everyone of them naked. Women, too."

Billikan cleared his throat. "I'll get you some clothes, Father. I'll bring them to you from home."

"Never mind that. Business first. Business first."

R. E. came out of his musing. "Is everyone coming out of their graves at the same time, sir?"

He stared curiously at Billikan, Senior, as he spoke. The old man's appearance was one of robust age —so much so that even his furrowed cheeks glowed with health. His age, R. E. decided, was exactly what it had been at the moment of his death, but his body was as it should have been if, at that age, it had functioned ideally.

Billikan, Senior, said, "No, sir, they are not. The newer graves are coming up first. Pottersby died five years before me and he came up about five minutes after me. Seeing him made me decide to leave. I had had enough of him when— And that reminds me." He brought his fist vigorously down on the desk, and a very solid fist it was. "There were no cabs, no busses. Telephones weren't working. I had to walk. I had to walk *twenty miles*."

"Baby-naked like that?" asked his son in a faint and appalled voice.

Billikan, Senior looked down upon his bare skin with casual approval. "It's warm today. Almost everyone else is naked. Anyway,

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son, I'm not here to make small-talk. Why is the factory shut down?"

"It isn't shut down. This is a special occasion."

"Special occasion, my foot. You call union headquarters and tell them Resurrection Day isn't in the contract. Every worker is being docked for every minute he's off the job."

Billikan's lean face took on a stubborn look as he peered at his father. "I will not. Don't forget, you're no longer in charge of this plant. I am."

"Oh, you are? By what right?"

"By your will."

"Very well. Here I am in the flesh and I void my will."

"You can't, Father. You're dead. You may not look dead, but I have witnesses. I have the doctor's certificate. I have receipted bills from the undertaker. I can even get testimony from the pall-bearers."

Billikan, Senior, stared at his son, sat down, placed his arm over the back of the chair, crossed his legs and said, "If it comes to that, we're all dead, aren't we? The world's come to an end, hasn't it?"

"But you've been declared legally dead and I haven't."

"Oh, we'll change that, son. There are going to be more of us than of you and votes count."

Billikan, Junior, tapped the desk firmly with the flat of his hand and flushed slightly. "Father, I hate to bring up this particular point, but you force me to. May I remind you that by now I am sure that Mother is sitting at home waiting for you; that she probably had to walk the streets—uh—naked, too. And that she probably isn't in a good humor."

Billikan, Senior, went ludicrously pale. "Good Heavens!"

"And you know she always wanted you to retire."

Billikan, Senior came to a quick decision. "I'm not going home. Why, this is a nightmare. Aren't there any limits to this Resurrection business. It's—it's sheer anarchy. There's such a thing as overdoing it. I'm just not going home."

At which point, a somewhat rotund gentleman with a smooth, pink face and fluffy white sideburns—much like pictures of Martin Van Buren—stepped in and said coldly, "*Good* day."

"Father," said Billikan, Senior.

"Grandfather," said Billikan, Junior.

Billikan, Grandsenior, looked at Billikan, Junior with disapproval. "If you are my grandson," he said, "you've aged considerably and the change has not improved you."

Billikan, Junior, smiled with dyspeptic feebleness, and made no answer.

Billikan, Grandsenior did not seem to require one. He said, "Now if you two will bring me up to date on the business, I will resume my managerial function."

There were two simultaneous answers, and Billikan Grandsenior's floridity waxed dangerously as he

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beat the ground peremptorily with an imaginary cane and barked a retort.

R. E. said, "Gentlemen."

He raised his voice, *"Gentlemen!"*

He shrieked at full lung-power. "GENTLEMEN!"

Conversation snapped off sharply and all three Billikans turned to look at him. R. E.'s angular face, his oddly attractive eyes, and sardonic mouth seemed suddenly to dominate the gathering.

He said, "I don't understand this argument. Exactly what do you manufacture?"

"Bitsies," said Billikan, Junior.

"Which, I take it, are a packaged cereal breakfast food."

"Teeming with energy in every golden, crispy flake!" cried Billikan, Junior.

"Covered with honey-sweet, crystalline sugar; a confection and a food—" growled Billikan, Senior.

"To tempt the most jaded appetite!" roared Billikan, Grandsenior.

"Exactly," said R. E. "What appetite?"

They stared stolidly at him. "I beg your pardon," said Billikan, Junior.

"Are any of you hungry?" asked R. E. "I'm not."

"What is this fool maundering about," demanded Billikan, Grandsenior, angrily. His invisible cane would have been prodding R. E. in the navel had it—the cane, not the navel—existed.

R. E. said, "I'm trying to tell you that no one will ever eat again. It is the *Hereafter,* and food is unnecessary."

The expressions on the faces of the Billikans needed no interpretation. It was obvious that they had tried to summon their own appetites and had found them missing.

Billikan, Junior, said ashenly, "Ruined!"

Billikan, Grandsenior, pounded the floor heavily and noiselessly with his imaginary cane. "This is confiscation of property without due process of law. I'll sue. You'll see."

"Quite unconstitutional," agreed Billikan, Senior.

"If you can find anyone to sue, I wish you all good fortune," said R. E. agreeably. "And now if you'll excuse me I think I'll walk toward the graveyard."

He put his hat on his head and walked out the door.

III

Etheriel, his vortices quivering, stood before the glory of a six-winged cherub.

The cherub said, "If I understand you, your particular universe has been dismantled."

"Exactly."

"Well, surely, now, you don't expect *me* to set it up again."

"I don't expect you to do anything," said Etheriel, "except to arrange an appointment for me with the Chief."

The cherub gestured his respect instantly at hearing the word. Two

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wing-tips covered his feet, an equal number his eyes and his mouth. He restored himself to normal and said, "The Chief is quite busy. There are a myriad score of matters for him to decide."

"Who denies that? I merely wish to make him realize that if matters stand as they are now, there will have been a universe in which Satan will have won the final victory."

"Satan?"

"It's the Hebrew word for Adversary," said Etheriel, impatiently. "I could say Ahriman, which is the Persian word. In any case, I mean the Adversary."

The cherub said, "But what will an interview with the Chief accomplish? The document authorizing the Last Trump was countersigned by the Chief in person and you ought to know that makes it irrevocable. The Chief would never limit his own omnipotence by cancelling a word once spoken in his official capacity."

"Is that final? You will not arrange an appointment?"

"I cannot."

Etheriel said, "In that case, I shall seek out the Chief without one. I will invade the Primum Mobile. If it means my destruction, so be it." He gathered his energies.

The cherub murmured in horror, "Sacrilege!" and there was a faint gathering of thunder as Etheriel sprang upward and was gone.

"Sacrilege!" reiterated the cherub, his rosy cheeks seeming visibly to wither and age.

IV

R. E. Mann passed through the crowding streets and grew used to the sight of people bewildered, disbelieving, apathetic, in makeshift clothing or, more frequently, none at all.

A little girl, who looked about twelve, leaned over an iron gate, one foot on a cross-bar, swinging it to and fro, and said as he passed, "Hello, mister."

"Hello," said R. E. The girl was obviously not one of the returnees, for she wore clothes that fitted her perfectly.

The girl said, "We got a new baby in our house. She's a sister I once had. Mommy is crying and they sent me out here."

R. E. said, "Well, well," passed through the gate and up the paved walk to the house, a dwelling with modest pretensions to middle class gentility. He rang the bell, obtained no answer, opened the door and walked in.

He followed the sound of sobbing and knocked at an inner door. A stout man of about fifty with little hair and a comfortable supply of cheek and chin looked out at him with mingled astonishment and resentment.

"Who are you?"

R. E. removed his hat. "I thought I might be able to help. Your little girl outside—"

A woman looked up at him hopelessly from a chair by a double bed. Her hair was beginning to

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gray. Her face was puffed and unsightly with weeping and the veins stood out bluely on the back of her hands. A baby lay on the bed, plump and naked. It kicked its feet languidly and its sightless infant's eyes turned aimlessly here and there.

"This is my baby," said the woman. "She was born twenty-three years ago in this house and she died when she was ten days old. I wanted her back so much."

"And now you have her," said R.E.

"But it's too late," cried the woman, vehemently. "I've had three other children. My oldest girl is married and my son is in the army. I'm too old to have a baby now. And even if—even if—oh, it's unthinkable!"

Her features worked in a heroic effort to keep back the tears and failed.

Her husband said with flat tonelessness. "It's not a real baby. It doesn't cry. It doesn't soil itself. It won't take milk. What will we do? It'll never grow. It'll always be a baby."

R. E. shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I'm afraid I can do nothing to help."

Quietly, he left. Quietly, he thought of the hospitals. Thousands of babies must be appearing at each one.

Place them in racks, he thought, sardonically. Stack them like cordwood. They need no care. Their little bodies are each merely the custodian of an indestructible spark of life.

He passed two little boys of apparently equal chronological age, perhaps ten. Their voices were shrill. The body of one glistened white in the sunless light, so apparently he was a returnee. The other was not. R. E. paused to listen.

The bare one said, "I had scarlet fever."

A spark of envy at the other's claim to notoriety seemed to enter the clothed one's voice. "Gee."

"That's why I died," the naked lad said.

"Gee. Did they use pensillun or auromysun?"

"What?"

"They're medicines. New medicines."

"I never heard of them."

"Boy, you never heard of *much*."

"I know as much as *you*."

"Yeah? Who's President of the United States?"

"Warren Harding, that's who."

"You're crazy. It's Eisenhower."

"Who's he?"

"Ever see television?"

"What's that?"

The clothed boy hooted ear-splittingly. "It's something you turn on and see comedians, movies, cowboys, rocket rangers, anything you want."

"Let's see it."

There was a pause and the boy from the present said, "It ain't working."

The other boy shrieked his

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scorn. "You mean it ain't never worked. You made it all up."

R. E. shrugged and passed on.

The crowds thinned as he left town and neared the cemetery. Those who were left were all walking into town, and all were nude.

A man stopped him—a cheerful man with pinkish skin and white hair who had the marks of pince-nez on either side of the bridge of his nose, but no glasses to go with them.

"Greetings, friend."

"Hello," said R. E.

"You're the first man with clothing that I've seen. You were alive when the trumpet blew, I suppose."

"Yes, I was."

"Well, isn't this great? Isn't this joyous and delightful? Come rejoice with me."

"You like this, do you?" said R. E.

"*Like it?* A pure and radiant joy fills me. We are surrounded by the light of the first day—the light that glowed softly and serenely before the sun, moon, and stars were made. You know your Genesis, of course. There is the comfortable warmth that must have been one of the highest blisses of Eden; not enervating heat nor assaulting cold. Men and women walk the streets unclothed and are not ashamed. All is well, my friend, all is well."

R. E. said, "Well, it's a fact that I haven't felt the need to cast a roving eye at the feminine display at all."

"Naturally not," said the other. "Lust and sin as we remember it in our Earthly existence no longer exists. Let me introduce myself, friend, as I was in Earthly times. My name on Earth was Winthrop Hester. I was born in eighteen hundred and twelve and died in eighteen eighty-four, as we counted time then. Through the last forty years of my life I labored to bring my little flock to the Kingdom and I go now to count the ones I have won."

R. E. regarded the ex-minister solemnly, "Surely there has been no Judgement yet."

"Why not. The Lord sees within a man and in the same instant that all things of the world ceased, all men were judged, and we are the saved."

"There must be a great many saved."

"On the contrary, my son, we are but as a remnant."

"A pretty large remnant. As near as I can make out, everyone's coming back to life. I've seen some pretty unsavory characters back in town as alive as you are."

The minister scowled.

"Last-minute repentance—"

"*I* never repented."

"Of what, my son?"

"Of the fact that I never attended church."

Winthrop Hester stepped back hastily. "Were you ever baptized?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Winthrop Hester trembled. "Surely you believed in God?"

"Well," said R. E. "I believed

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a lot of things about Him that would probably startle you."

Winthrop Hester turned and hurried off in great agitation.

In what remained of his walk to the cemetery—R. E. had no way of estimating time, nor did it occur to him to try—no one else stopped him. He found the cemetery itself all but empty, its trees and grass gone but its headstones still standing. It occurred to him that there was nothing green in the world; the ground everywhere was a hard, featureless, grainless gray; the sky a luminous white.

On one of the graves sat a lean and furrowed man with long, black hair on his head and a shorter, though more impressive mat, on his chest and upper arms.

He called out in a deep voice, "Hey, there, you!"

R. E. sat down on a neighboring headstone. "Hello," he replied.

Black Hair said, "Your clothes don't look right. What year was it when it happened?"

"Nineteen hundred and fifty-six."

"I died in eighteen hundred seven. Funny! I expected to be one pretty hot boy right about now, with the 'tarnal flames shooting up my innards."

"Aren't you coming along to town?" asked R. E.

"My name's Zeb," said the ancient. "That's short for Zebulon, but Zeb's good enough. What's the town like? Changed some, I reckon?"

"It's got nearly a hundred thousand people in it."

Zeb's mouth yawned somewhat, "Go on. That would make it bigger'n Philadelphia. You're making fun."

"Philadelphia's got—" R. E. paused. Stating the figure would do him no good. Instead, he said, "The town's grown in a century and a half you know."

"Country, too?"

"Forty-eight states," said R. E. "All the way to the Pacific."

"No," Zeb slapped his thigh in delight and then winced at the unexpected absence of rough homespun to take up the worst of the blow. "I'd head out West if I wasn't needed here. Yes, sir," his face grew lowering and his thin lips took on a definite grimness. "I'll stay right here, where I'm needed."

He slapped his thigh again.

"Why are you needed?"

The explanation came out briefly, bitten off hard. "Injuns!"

"Indians?"

"Millions of 'em. First the tribes we fought and licked and then tribes who ain't never seen a white man. They'll all come back to life. I'll need my old buddies. You city fellers ain't no good at it. Ever seen an Injun?"

R. E. said, "Not around here lately, no."

Zeb looked his contempt. He tried to spit to one side but found no saliva for the purpose. He said, "You better git back to the city, then. After a while, it ain't going

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to be safe nohow round here. Wish I had my musket."

R. E. rose, thought a moment, shrugged, and faced back to the city. The headstone he had been sitting upon collapsed as he rose, falling into a powder of grey stone that melted into the featureless ground. He looked about. Most of the headstones were gone. The rest would not last long. Only the one under Zeb still looked firm and strong.

R. E. began the walk back. Zeb did not turn to look at him. He remained waiting quietly and calmly—for Indians.

V

Etheriel plunged through the heavens in reckless haste. The eyes of the Ascendants were on him, he knew. From late-born seraph, through cherubs and angels, to the highest archangel, they must be watching.

Already he was higher than any Ascendant, uninvited, had ever been before and he waited for the quiver of the Word that would reduce his vortices to non-existence.

But he did not falter. Through non-space and non-time, he plunged toward union with the Primum Mobile—the seat that encompassed all that Is, Was, Would Be, Had Been, Could Be and Might Be.

And as he thought that, he burst through and was part of it, his being expanding so that momentarily he, too, was part of the All. But then it was mercifully veiled from his senses, and the Chief was a still, small voice within him. Yet in its infinity it was not small, but filled all space about him.

"My son," the voice said, "I know why you have come."

"Then help me, if that be your will."

"By my own will," said the Chief, "an act of mine is irrevocable. All mankind, my son, yearned for life. All feared death. All evolved thoughts and dreams of life unending. No two groups of men, no two single individuals, evolved the same after-life, but all desired life. I was petitioned that I might grant the common denominator of all their wishes—life unending. I did so."

"No servant of yours made that request," Etherial whispered.

"The Adversary did, my son."

Etheriel trailed his feeble glory in dejection and said in a low voice, "I am dust in your sight and unworthy to be in your presence, yet I must ask a question. Is then the Adversary your servant also?"

"Without him I can have no other," said the Chief, "for what is Good but the eternal fight against Evil?"

And in that fight, thought Etheriel, *I have lost.*

VI

R. E. paused in sight of the town. The buildings were crumbling, and those that were made of wood were

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already heaps of rubble. R. E. walked to the nearest such heap and found the wooden splinters powdery and dry.

He penetrated deeper into town and found the brick buildings still standing. But there was an ominous roundness to the edges of the bricks, a threatening flakiness.

"They won't last long," said a deep voice, "but there is this consolation, if consolation it can be called. Their collapse can kill no one."

R. E. looked up in surprise and found himself face to face with a cadaverous Don Quixote of a man, lantern-jawed, and sunken-cheeked. His eyes, R. E. perceived, were sad and his brown hair was lank and straight. His clothes hung loosely and his skin showed clearly through the various rents.

"My name," said the man, "is Richard Levine. I was a professor of history once—before this happened."

"You're wearing clothes," said R. E. "You're not one of the resurrected."

"No, but that mark of distinction is vanishing. Clothes are going."

R. E. looked at the throngs that drifted passed them, moving about slowly and aimlessly like motes in a sunbeam. Vanishingly few wore clothes. He looked down at himself and noticed for the first time that the seam down the length of each trouser leg had parted. He pinched the fabric of his jacket between his thumb and forefinger and the wool parted and came away easily.

"I guess you're right," said R. E.

"If you'll notice," went on Levine, "Mellon's Hill is flattening out."

R. E. turned to the north where ordinarily the mansions of the aristocracy—such aristocracy as the town possessed—studded the slopes of Mellon's Hill, and found the horizon nearly flat.

Levine said, "Eventually, there'll be nothing but flatness, featurelessness, nothingness—and us."

"And Indians," said R. E. "There's a man outside of town waiting for Indians and wishing he had a musket."

"I imagine," said Levine, "the Indians will give no trouble. There is no pleasure in fighting an enemy that cannot be killed nor hurt. And even if that were not so, the lust for battle would be gone, as are all lusts."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. Before all this happened, although you might not think it to look at me, I derived much harmless pleasure in a consideration of the female figure. Now, with the unexampled opportunities at my disposal, I find myself irritatingly uninterested. No, that is wrong. I am not even irritated at my disinterest."

R. E. looked up briefly at the passers-by. "I see what you mean."

"The coming of Indians here," said Levine, "is nothing compared with the situation in the Old

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World. Early during the Resurrection, Hitler and his Wehrmacht must have come back to life and must now be facing and be intermingled with Stalin and the Red Army all the way from Berlin to Stalingrad. To complicate the situation, the Kaisers and the Czars will arrive.

"The men at Verdun and the Somme are back in the old battlegrounds. Napoleon and his Marshals are scattered over Western Europe. And Mohammed must be back to see what following ages have made of Islam, while the Saints and Apostles consider the paths of Christianity. And even the Mongols, poor things, the Khans from Temujin to Aurangzeb, must be wandering the steppes helplessly, longing for their horses."

"As a professor of history," said R. E., "you must long to be there and observe."

"How could I be there? Every man's position on Earth is restricted to the distance he can walk. There are no machines of any kind, and, as I have just mentioned, no horses. And what would I find in Europe anyway? Apathy, I think! There is apathy here."

A soft plopping sound caused R. E. to turn around. The wing of a neighboring brick building had collapsed in dust. Portions of bricks lay on either side of him. Some must have hurtled through him without his being aware of it. He looked about. The heaps of rubble were less numerous, and those that remained were smaller in size.

He said, "I met a man who thought we had all been judged and are in Heaven."

"Judged?" said Levine, "Why, yes, I imagine we are. We face eternity *now*. We have no universe left, no outside phenomena, no emotions, no passions—nothing but ourselves and thought. We face an eternity of introspection, when all through history we have never known what to do with ourselves on a rainy Sunday."

"You sound as though the situation bothers you."

"It does more than that. The Dantean conceptions of Inferno were childish and unworthy of the Divine imagination: fire and torture. Boredom is much more subtle. The inner torture of a mind unable to escape from itself in any way, condemned to fester in its own exuding mental stew for all time, is much more fitting. Oh, yes, my friend, we have been judged, and condemned, too, and this is not Heaven, but Hell."

And Levine rose with shoulders drooping dejectedly, and walked away.

R. E. gazed thoughtfully about and nodded his head. He was satisfied.

VII

The self-admission of failure lasted but an instant in Etheriel and then, quite suddenly, he lifted his being as brightly and highly as

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he dared in the presence of the Chief and his glory was a tiny dot of light in the infinite Primum Mobile.

"If it be your will, then," he said, "I do not ask you to defeat your will but to fulfill it."

"In what way, my son?"

"The document, approved by the Council of Ascendants and signed by yourself, authorizes the Day of Resurrection at a specific time of a specific day of the year 1956 as Earthmen count time."

"So it did."

"But the year 1956 is unqualified. What then is 1956? To the dominant culture on Earth the year was 1956 A.D. That is true. Yet from the time you breathed existence into Earth and its universe there have passed 5,960 years. Based on the internal evidence you created within that universe, nearly four billion years have passed. Is the year, *unqualified,* then 1956, 5960, or 4000000000.

"Nor is that all," Etheriel went on, "The year 1956 A.D. is the year 7464 of the Byzantine era, and 5716 by the Jewish calendar. It is the year 1375 in the Mohammedan calendar, and the 180th year of the independence of the United States.

"Humbly I ask then if it does not seem to you that a year referred to as 1956 alone and without qualification has no meaning."

The Chief's still small voice said, "I have always known this' my son; it was you who had to learn."

"Then," said Etheriel, quivering luminously with joy, "let the very letter of your will be fulfilled and let the day of Resurrection fall in 1956, but only when all the inhabitants of Earth unanimously agree that a certain year shall be numbered 1956 and none other."

"So let it be," said the Chief, and this Word recreated Earth and all it contained, together with the Sun and Moon and all the hosts of heaven.

VIII

It was 7 A. M. on January 1, 1956 when R. E. Mann awoke with a start. The very beginnings of a melodious note that ought to have filled all the universe had sounded and yet had not sounded.

For a moment, he cocked his head as though to allow understanding to flow in, and then a trifle of rage crossed his face to vanish again. It was but another battle.

He sat down at his desk to compose the next plan of action. People already spoke of calendar reform and it would have to be stimulated. A new era must begin with December 2, 1944 and someday a new year 1956 would come; 1956 of the Atomic Era, acknowledged as such by all the world.

A strange light shone on his head as thoughts passed through his more-than-human mind and the shadow of Ahriman on the wall seemed to have small horns at either temple.

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miss quatro

by . . . Alice Eleanor Jones

Miss Quatro was wonderful with the children. So *respectable* too—a marvelous housekeeper. But where she came from nobody knew.

EDITH HORTON said into the telephone, "Oh, Myra, I'm so sorry you can't go . . . Yes, it ought to be fun. And no worry about Judy. Miss Quatro's taking care of her." She glanced across the room to where the housekeeper sat sewing, her head bent over the child's dress.

"What? . . . Oh, she's wonderful! Marvelous with Judy, yes. We've had her nearly a month now. Just after you went to the cottage . . . Oh, of course a new dress! Blue . . ." She spoke kindly to the housekeeper. "The light's not good there, Miss Quatro. You'll hurt your eyes."

"The light is entirely adequate, madam," Miss Quatro said precisely. She looked at Edith. She was a small woman, slender and pale, very genteel, with no-color hair and no-color eyes. She wore a black dress with a white collar, and a flat milky brooch like a blind eye, and black stockings and shoes. "I can go into the other room if you prefer it," she added courteously, in her no-color voice.

Edith blushed. "Oh, no, Miss Quatro, I didn't mean— Yes, I'm

When the Pied Piper of legendary renown went zigzagging down the crooked streets of a village not wholly mythical the children followed him without clearly understanding why the eerie magic of his flute so fascinated them. The Miss Quatro of this unforgettable excursion into the paraphysical is more terrifyingly talkative, but the mystery lingers on. Fantasy's golden diadem to the Jones girl for her superb mastery of suspense raised to high C!

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still here, Myra. Stay where you are, Miss Quatro."

"Yes, madam." Miss Quatro's head bent again; her thin fingers skillfully mended the dress.

"I'll see you Friday, Myra, at Helen's? . . . Good. And I do think it's a shame Mrs. Beck disappointed you."

"If you will excuse me, madam," Miss Quatro said. "I could not help overhearing. Is there trouble finding a sitter for Mrs. Glenn's children?"

Surprised, Edith turned from the phone. "Just a minute, Myra . . . What did you say, Miss Quatro?"

"I beg your pardon, madam," said the housekeeper, inclining her head in the merest sketch of a bow, "if I seem to intrude. I was about to suggest that if Mrs. Glenn were to bring her children here this evening I should be glad to look after them for her. They might even stay the night, madam."

Edith smiled delightedly. "Why, Miss Quatro, how kind of you! Mrs. Glenn will be very grateful. But won't it be too much for you?"

"No, madam, not at all."

"I'll tell her, then . . . Myra, Miss Quatro's offered to take the children . . . Yes, here. They could stay till morning . . . Yes, isn't it? Didn't I tell you? . . . Mrs. Glenn wants to talk to you, Miss Quatro."

The housekeeper put down her sewing and moved to the telephone. She had a strange silent walk, oddly stiff, as if her legs carried the rest of her about like a parcel. The conversation was brief, consisting mostly of "Yes, madam" and "Quite all right, madam" and "Thank you, madam."

"Shall I hang up now, madam?" asked Miss Quatro, turning to Edith.

"Yes, please . . . Miss Quatro, that was such a kind thing to do."

"Not at all, madam," said Miss Quatro.

"Yes, it was. Thank you. Thank you very much . . . Will you have dinner a little early tonight? About six? I'll have to dress."

"As you wish, madam. At six."

* * *

During the first intermission at the country club dance, the Hortons and the Glenns sat together on the wide porch, sipping drinks and talking.

"Edie, this is nice!" Myra Glenn said, leaning her dark head back with a gentle sigh. "Your Miss Quatro's very kind. But she's"—she hesitated, frowning—"don't you think there's something . . . That sounds ungrateful; forget it, Edie."

"She is rather odd," Edith agreed, and smiled. She was looking exceptionally pretty in a dark blue dress that set off her blonde coloring. "Very efficient, though, and so good with Judy."

"It was darned nice of her to take on three strange kids at such short notice," said Bob Glenn.

"Oh, she knows them," said Myra. "They came home from

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Judy's yesterday just full of the wonderful Miss Quatro."

"She likes kids," said George Horton in his solid comfortable voice. "Make it another round, waiter."

"We're lucky to have her," Edith said earnestly to Myra. "And I—like her."

"You can't mean you actually—" Myra stopped and began again. "They say she tells them stories."

"Stories, dear?"

"Not stories, *the* story," said George. "The kids make a big point of that. She tells them *the* story. Sure you're not tired, Edie?"

She smiled at him affectionately. "No, George. I'm not an invalid any more."

"What kind of a story?" asked Bob idly. He was dark and slender like his wife; both the Hortons were fair.

Edith laughed. "I've never heard it," she said. "It's a secret between her and the children. The music's started again; dance with me, Bob."

* * *

The four children sat up in their beds on the Hortons' sleeping porch where Judy slept in summer. Judy's bed was a double, and she was sharing it with Carla Glenn. They were both seven years old, one blonde and one dark, with big eyes, and long hair done in braids. Bobby and Jeff Glenn, the five-year-old twins, had cots dragged down from the attic. Their cropped heads bobbed up and down. They could not bear to be still, especially at bedtime.

Four pairs of eyes were fixed upon Miss Quatro, who was adjusting windows and blinds. She moved softly about the porch with her odd walk, her face pale and quiet, her hands deft. When she had finished she sat down on the foot of Judy's bed.

"Now tell us the story, Miss Quatro," demanded Judy.

"Yes, Miss Quatro, tell us now!" cried Carla.

"Tell, tell!" chorused the twins, bouncing mightily.

"Very well, children," said Miss Quatro quietly. "Now I shall tell you the story. Robert, Jeffrey, come over here so that you can see."

* * *

"You're tired," Edith said gently to Miss Quatro, as the housekeeper sat at the kitchen table polishing the silver. "Don't do that now."

"It is nearly finished, madam," said Miss Quatro, busy with the cream pitcher. "I am not tired."

Edith took the pitcher out of her hands. "Yes, you are," she said. "You look exhausted. The silver doesn't matter. Go and rest."

Miss Quatro looked at her. Most surprisingly, faint color appeared in her cheeks. "Very well, madam, if you wish." She left the kitchen, going quickly, hurrying.

* * *

"And all I hear from my two," said Helen Talbot toward the end of an afternoon of scrabble, "is

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Miss Quatro. What have you got at your house, Edie—a pied piper?"

Myra said, "—and one is eighteen," and drew two tiles. "She's certainly got *something*." Scrabble was a very exacting game, and Myra half-wished she had suggested bridge instead.

"She's got the perfect housekeeper and the perfect nursemaid," said Ruth Hallman a shade enviously. "Our plutocratic friend!"

"I had to," Edith said apologetically. People were always apologizing to red-headed, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued Ruth. "Thirty, Helen . . . I had to, after I—after I lost the baby."

"Shut up, Ruth," said Helen calmly, writing "30" in Edith's column. Sturdy, blunt Helen—she never apologized to anybody. "Edith can have a housekeeper if she wants one—and can afford it! 'Lory,' Edie? I don't believe it."

Edith smiled. "It's a bird, Helen. Want to challenge?"

"Oh, no, I know you too well. Let it go. I must say, though, Edie, she's an odd-looking specimen, your Miss Quatro."

Myra shivered. "She gives me a chill. I'm sorry, but she does."

Ruth said, "Darn it, Edie, you spoiled my word. Full-time help that sleeps in wouldn't chill me! I heard she's come down in the world, Edie—used to work for Park Avenue. What's she doing here?"

"Not Park Avenue," Edith said diffidently. Ruth always made her nervous. "She did have a job in New York, though, with a Mrs. Beekman. It was too much for her —Miss Quatro. She needed a quieter place, smaller. The Beekmans gave her a wonderful reference."

Helen said, "You checked it, I hope."

"I meant to," said Edith, "but the others who answered the ad were awful, and she seemed so—so *respectable,* and I was feeling . . . Well, by the time she'd been with us two days I knew we couldn't do without her." She looked around the table almost defiantly. "And we can't."

"Well, it's your house," Myra said, "and your business. Are you going to do anything, Ruth?"

"Don't rush me, just don't rush me."

* * *

"I'm writing your check, Miss Quatro," George Horton said, looking up from the papers on his desk, "and I have to fill out these forms, too. What's your social security number? May I see the card?"

"I am sorry, sir," said Miss Quatro. "I must have lost it, and I do not recall the number."

"That's all right, Miss Quatro. Let me know when you get it replaced." He smiled at her. "I don't think we told you how much we like having you here."

Edith said, "How much we appreciate all you do." She added

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impulsively, "How much we like you!"

Miss Quatro looked at them, a strange expression in her no-color eyes, but she said only, "Thank you, sir. Thank you, madam. Now if you will excuse me—"

* * *

"And the way she talks," Myra said, as she and Edith drove home from the parent-teachers'. "No idioms, no contractions even! Is she a foreigner? Quatro—that sounds Italian, or Spanish."

"I don't know," Edith said slowly. "I don't really know, Myra."

Myra took her eyes off the road long enough to look earnestly at her friend. "Edie, she's living in your house. She takes care of your child. You ought to know something about her."

Edith smiled a little. "I know that she manages the house perfectly. I know that she's honest and courteous and intelligent. And I know that Judy loves her. I can't quite see why, her manner's so odd. But she does. Don't you think that's enough?"

"It wouldn't be for me," said Myra. "But you're always so trusting, Edie. And the way you treat that woman—like a member of the family. How can you? I'm—I'm almost afraid of her!"

Edith said quietly, "I'm not. Do you know, Myra, she acts sometimes as if she were—afraid of us."

Myra raised her eyebrows. "For heaven's sake, why?"

"I don't know," Edith said thoughtfully. "She works so hard—too hard. She does things that aren't necessary. Myra, my house is so clean it's ridiculous. But when we try to thank her, or tell her to take it easier, she just—shies away from us, effaces herself, goes out of the room. Why, Myra?"

"Because she's queer," the other said with conviction.

"You know," Edith went on, frowning a little, "she did something once, I even forget what—oh, I know, it was the table for Judy's birthday party—and it was beautiful. I remember I said, 'You can be proud of that,' and she gave me such a look . . . Maybe I sounded patronizing; I didn't mean to. I just don't understand her, Myra.

Myra braked sharply to avoid a cat crossing the road. "Darn fool thing! . . . All the same, Edie, if it were me I'd find out more about her. You're going shopping in the city next week, aren't you? Why don't you look up this Mrs. Beekman, Edie, and ask her."

Edith said quickly, "Oh, Myra, I wouldn't do that."

"Call her, then. Or write to her."

"Well—maybe I will. Just to prove you're wrong." Edith laughed suddenly. "Miss Quatro . . . Miss Four!"

* * *

On the Saturday when Edith went to New York Miss Quatro took the children on a picnic. She took every child in the neighbor-

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hood, and there were a great many. She led them off through the woods to Palmer's field, a wide pasture that had once been part of Palmer's farm, long abandoned and overgrown. The pasture was often used for picnics. It was a pleasant place in late summer, drowsy with sunshine, fragant and still. Miss Quatro was a staid and spinsterish piper in her black clothes, with the children frolicking after her.

* * *

George met Edith at the station in the late afternoon. She looked upset, and her face was paler than it ought to have been.

"George," she said as she stepped into the car, "there isn't any Mrs. Grant Lester Beekman in New York."

George was having trouble getting the Dodge up the grade. He said absently, "I'm afraid she's had it, Edie. We're going to have to trade her in."

"George, listen to me!" Edith's voice was tense. "I said there isn't any Mrs. Grant Lester Beekman. There isn't any in the phone book. So I asked information for the phone number, and there isn't any."

George coaxed the car to the top of the hill. "Edie, you're not making sense."

"*Listen*, George! I couldn't believe it, so I got a taxi, and I asked the driver to go there, and there isn't any such place."

George looked at her and stopped the car. "Edie, start from the beginning and take it slow."

"All right. Give me a cigarette, George." She drew on it nervously. "I was checking on Miss Quatro. I did it mostly to prove to Myra . . . Well, I thought I'd just check the reference, anyway. And it's phony, George — completely phony!"

George's face was serious. "You mean there isn't any Mrs. Beekman? And there isn't any address like the one in the letter?"

"No, George. Not in the entire city of New York."

George said slowly, "Let's not jump at anything, Edie."

"And the social security card," Edith said suddenly. "She never showed it to us. George, I'm scared!" She began to cry.

He put his arm around her. "The card wouldn't prove anything, one way or the other," he said soberly. "Anybody can get one, and anybody can lose one."

"I should have checked," Edith sobbed. "If only I'd checked!"

"Don't get excited, Edie," George said, patting her shoulder. "Miss Quatro's a good housekeeper, isn't she? And Judy loves her, don't forget that—all the kids do. That's the main thing. There can't be much wrong with anybody the kids are so crazy about. There's probably some simple explanation for the whole business. Don't cry, Edie. We'll ask her. When she comes back from the picnic we'll just ask her."

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The children sat in a close semicircle around Miss Quatro in Palmer's field—three deep, kneeling, squatting, crouching, their faces expectant. "Tell us the story, Miss Quatro . . . tell us now. . . . tell us."

"Very well, children," said Miss Quatro quietly. "Now I shall tell you the story."

She looked all around the circle. The children were silent; their faces were eager and wild. Miss Quatro took off the brooch that looked like a blind eye and held it in her hands. "Look, children," she said softly, "look."

She began to speak, and her voice changed. It had color now, all the colors in the world. Her eyes changed, and they too had all the colors in the world.

"There is a place, children," said Miss Quatro, "like no other place you have ever seen. It is a city, a city of jewels, a city of light . . . Look, children, look at the city."

She moved the brooch slowly in a half-circle, twice, once low and once high, so that even those in the back row could see it.

"Tell us about the towers, Miss Quatro," said Judy Horton dreamily, and the words echoed around the circle. "The towers . . . tell us again!"

"The towers are high and shining," said Miss Quatro. "The slaves built them for a thousand years, and many gave their lives in the building. The towers are made of onyx and amber and chalcedony. They are made of amethyst and opal and porphyry and jade." Her voice sang the lovely words they did not understand. "And the walls of the city are of ruby, red as fire, and the gates are chryselephantine . . . of ivory and gold."

She paused and moved the brooch again. "See it, children . . . do you see it?" Her voice compelled them. It was not so much the pictures, it was not so much the words, it was the voice. They sat in the drowsy meadow, and the voice enchanted them, as it had done so often before.

"We see . . . we see, Miss Quatro!"

"Parts of the walls are covered with pictures carved in the stone," said Miss Quatro. "Many slaves were blinded carving them." She smiled a little. "No one says to a slave—*You will hurt your eyes!*"

The children waited, patient, expectant.

"The sky is a color you have never seen," said Miss Quatro, "and the streets are full of music. The flowers are of crystal, and they glitter like a shower of rain. The slaves tend them."

"Tell us about the people, Miss Quatro. Tell us about the people!"

The brooch flashed again.

"The people are beautiful," said Miss Quatro, "with eyes like diamonds and hair like gold. They move to music from a thousand pipes and strings. The slaves make the music all night long."

"All night, Miss Quatro? Don't they get tired?"

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"Yes, they get tired. No one says to a slave—*Go and rest.*"

"But don't they sleep?"

"Yes, they sleep. They sleep to restore their bodies for the work they are commanded to do. That is the law. I have told you before, children."

"The people don't like the slaves." It was Judy, sounding troubled.

Miss Quatro said slowly, "No one says to a slave—*How much we like you.* The city belongs to the people, children, and the slaves belong to the people."

They were eager again; they forgot the slaves. "Tell us how happy the people are, Miss Quatro! Tell us what they do. Tell us again."

Miss Quatro paused for a long moment and covered the brooch with her hands. A sigh of disappointment went up from the circle. "Show us, Miss Quatro . . . show us!"

"Soon, children . . . Children, the story changes. This part of the story you have never heard. Listen, listen carefully."

The children sat like stone, the sun warm on their bodies, their faces tranced and seeking.

"The people are sad," said Miss Quatro, and her voice mourned like the deep notes of a bell. "The people weep in the towers. The people weep in the streets."

A moan of frantic sorrow swept around the circle. "Why, Miss Quatro?"

"Because"—her voice shook and cried—"because there is no food. Because there is no—food—left."

"No food?"

"It is so little that is required . . . so little, that goes so far. And there is so little time to find it. There is no food in the city, children. There is none outside the gates. And the people starve. The —people—starve!"

The children wept.

"But there is hope." The voice hoped, and the children hoped. They raised their faces to the sunlight, their tears dried.

"The slaves are searching in other places, far from the city—far, children, far!—for the food, for the life, as they have been commanded to do. Commanded with . . . there is a thing that is done to slaves."

She stopped. The eyes of the children were on her, blind with wonder, and fear, and love. "They are searching everywhere for the food," said Miss Quatro at last. "And one of them has found it. Only one."

The children cried, "Show us, Miss Quatro! Show us!"

"Soon, children . . . The slave has found the food that is not bought in the shops, that is not taken in the hands, that is not taken in the bowl, that is not eaten with the mouth. It remains only to take it back to the city. Quickly, for the time has run out. Humbly and with dread, for no one says to a slave—*Thank you* . . . Look, children!"

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Miss Quatro uncovered the brooch and held it high. The children looked. It was a blaze, it was a fire, it was all the colors in the world, it was all the colors they had never seen. It was suddenly Miss Quatro's eyes, it was a door.

Miss Quatro held the brooch and gazed at the children. The sun shone gently on them, the grass moved in the light wind, there was no sound.

Miss Quatro said suddenly, "I will not go back! Let the city die!" She said to the children, "Cover your faces!"

She turned and cast the brooch from her, far out and away. There was a sharp sound, not loud, like the shattering of glass, and a flare of light. Miss Quatro fell and lay quiet in the field.

For a minute the children were shocked and still. Then they began to move, to stand up, and some of the smaller ones began to cry. Miss Quatro did not stir.

"Oh, look—oh, look!" Carla said, and ran to her.

The children crowded around, sobbing. "Miss Quatro — Miss Quatro—"

Their treble voices broke as they clutched at her sleeve.

Miss Quatro briefly opened her no-color eyes and closed them again. She said quietly in her no-color voice, "Go home, children. They will be kind to you, as they were kind to me. I was not a slave here. A slave has no pride, and I am proud now."

Miss Quatro said quietly, as her life left her, "Children—go home."

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exchange

by . . . Robert Epstein

Human hate can be an explosive ingredient—in the mysterious, dark web which Time must weave.

GAMEL RAN silently through the trees, except for the occasional soft rattling of the amulet of human bones which encircled his left ankle. Though the dark of the night was unrelieved by even the faintest glimmer of moonbeams, he followed the narrow path without the slightest hesitation.

He had lived his whole life in this small section of Haiti, and even as a child knew every rotten log or jutting stone that might well have conspired to trip him had he been less wary. Now as an adult, he found that knowledge still of immense value. As the high voodoo priest of his neighborhood, the feared and respected *Houngan* Gamel, he often found it expedient to come and go by paths known only to himself.

As Gamel approached his destination he slowed down and made sure that no one was secretly observing him. This was his private altar, his own personal *Hounfort*—and as such was taboo to all others. He had not reached his

However great the frustrations which may confront an editor in his search for unsuspected talent, it is always a pleasure to publish the work of a new young writer of exceptional promise. Robert Epstein won honorable mention in a recent prize-story contest conducted by the FANTASY WRITERS' WORKSHOP *at the College of the City of New York, in conjunction with the editors of* FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. *In our last issue we published the winning story, an exciting documentary account of stark disaster in space. Mr. Epstein has chosen to remain on Earth, with the future as his proving ground.*

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powerful position by taking unnecessary chances, and he intended to make sure that his hated rival, *Houngan* Dorsema, did not discover his secret and use it as a weapon against him.

Just thinking of Dorsema made him rage inwardly and set his temples to pounding. Who was this upstart *Houngan* to think that he could so easily supplant the all-powerful Gamel in the hearts and minds of his devotees! Before the night was over Dorsema would no longer be a rival. Tomorrow Gamel would graciously officiate at the wretched pretender's funeral services.

He sternly disciplined himself before he began the ceremony, for it was necessary for him to think and act calmly. He could not afford to make the slightest mistake. He had learned the necessary invocations—precisely how to bring about the sudden death of another human being. But never before had he set himself the fearful task of actually sending a rival *Houngan* to his death. But if he did not carry it off on the first try, who could tell what cruel and savage revenge the aroused Dorsema might not attempt!

He was sorry that his acolytes were not present to help him. The rhythms of the three *Rada* drums were a great stimulus to him and made the proper prayers come easier. But this time he would have to be satisfied with no other instrument than the simple *Ogan*.

Momentarily his thoughts dwelt proudly upon his very special *Ogan*. Dorsema had only a small steel bar which he tapped with a spike. But he, Gamel, had an *Ogan* that had been made in heaven itself.

How well he remembered the night he had found its two magical parts. He had just completed the services bidding welcome to the new year when in the sky had appeared a fire-ball, flaming and immense. It had fallen to earth nearby, and in the fire-blackened hollow entombing it he had found the twin hard bars of strange material —neither metal nor stone, but harder than either. Surely the strange carvings on them had been inspired by no less a divinity than the *Loa Goru*.

How else explain the shimmering of the air and the twisted appearance of trees and rocks when he struck the bars together. It was the power of his *Ogan* that gave Gamel the assurance of victory as he began to chant.

He began to chant the sacred prayers, shivering a little as he lit the fire on the sacred stone altar. Without any break in the singing he started the *Veve*. He let the white cornmeal stream from his hands on the hardened black earth, and with deft, quick strokes he drew the cabalistic signs. Then, when the complicated design had been completed to his satisfaction, he placed the carved bone knife in its precise center.

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With every muscle quivering and tensing, he began the dread dance of invocation—the plea to *Loa Goru* to kill his enemy. The flames from the fire shimmered and sparkled like myriads of fireflies on the light-mirroring sheen of his writhing, perspiring ebony body.

Abruptly he stopped, raising the *Ogăn* high, and remaining for an instant as motionless as a statue carved in stone. Then he struck the two parts of the instrument violently together.

Instantly, vertigo seized him. The scene before him twisted and melted, and the knife vanished. And at almost the same instant before the sudden disappearance could be impressed upon his consciousness, the pain came—sudden and sharp, and unbearably agonizing.

He screamed once, fell to his knees, and then forward on his face. He remembered nothing more.

CONRAD MALIN pushed a rigidly prescribed combination of buttons and was immediately rewarded by the appearance of Commissioner Andrews' pretty secretary on his visi-screen. She recognized him instantly.

"Good morning, Professor," she said. "The Commissioner just got in. I'll connect you."

Her image dimmed and vanished, and for a moment there was a faint humming sound. Then another face appeared on the screen.

The Commissioner's countenance showed very little of the strain he was under, and his voice was astonishingly calm and unhurried. "Good morning, Malin!" he said. "What can I do for you?"

For just a fraction of a second Malin hesitated. Then he plunged in, not stopping to draw breath.

"Look Commissioner, suppose something *does* go wrong, and Boyd is incapacitated somehow and the lives of all those men are at stake, and the spaceship as well, and if I was there I could—"

Andrews interrupted him, an edge to his voice as cutting as the flick of a steel-pronged whip.

"Malin, stop it. We've gone through all this a dozen times, and my decision is still unchanged. I'm telling you for the last time that when the *Star Visitor* starts on the first interstellar flight tomorrow, Tom Boyd will be its captain. Do you understand? You will not be on board."

Andrews' voice became a little kinder. "You know we consider you as good an astro-physicist as Boyd. But there are only the two of you, and we can't put all our eggs in one basket—especially a highly experimental basket. Boyd has the seniority, and so he got the job. Now be reasonable, and don't add to our almost intolerable burdens. I'll see you tomorrow at the take-off."

Malin felt his anger begin to choke him, and a vicious retort rose to his lips. He broke off communication before he could give

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himself away, telling himself bitterly that he couldn't take the Commissioner's high-handedness much longer. He had been battling with himself for fifteen years. but it did not occur to him that he could be in the wrong, even though he clearly remembered the deadly rage that had overcome him for the first time when he was sixteen.

The only thing that had saved him then had been the fact that he'd been alone in the woods when he had beaten to death his pet Venusian bear for having accidently destroyed the delicate Gravometer he had so painstakingly built.

He'd known then that something was wrong, that he was not as other men, for he had learned in school that for five hundred years —since the year 2400 to be exact— man had genetically removed from himself all traces of the destructive emotions. True, a few atavistic individuals had appeared from time to time.

But they had been found to be incurable, and had been separated from the community and forced to lead lonely, exiled lives. So since then he had fought not to betray himself, and yet he refused, paradoxically, to be ashamed of what he was.

It had been a losing battle, for the even-tempered calm civilization about him seemed both dull and stupid, and had served only to irritate him the more. The flight of the *Star Visitor* seemed to him to be his last chance to sublimate and submerge his defiant, individualistic emotions in the many new problems that would confront a privileged few on man's first trip to the stars.

Now his mind was made up. His plea to the Commissioner would be his last attempt to reason his way on board the spaceship. It had only been a sop to his conscience anyway, for from the very first his logical mind had pointed out the one and only real solution to his problem.

If Tom Boyd found himself physically unable to take command of the ship, then he, Conrad Malin, would get it by default. If Tom Boyd were to die there could be no possible doubt of the outcome.

His mind had not flinched from the thought, although he knew that no crime of any kind had been committed for at least five centuries. His only concern was to make sure that in a day and age of perfected science no possible suspicion of guilt could attach itself to him.

Actual physical contact with Boyd he rejected out of hand. It was too clumsy and uncertain. The employment of any of the known energy beams was also too dangerous to be seriously entertained. Their use as power for transportation had forced the Government to completely monitor them in order to eliminate accidents, and the authorities would instantly note any strange beam and trace it to its source.

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Therefore, when his recent experiments had shown him a new way to transmit energy, he had kept it a carefully guarded secret. Now it was time to put his secret knowledge to use.

Malin opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out the synthetic flesh mask he had prepared. He carefully molded it over his head and face. Then he donned a plain white tunic with the blue arm band of the service mechanic —all that was needed to complete his disguise.

He stepped out of his office suite and ascended to the roof, unnoticed amidst a crowd of other busy people. From there he took a public helic directly to Boyd's home.

Boyd was unmarried and lived in a suite of rooms in a ninety-storey hotel with its own rooftop helic station. Malin had no trouble entering Boyd's apartment on the pretext of checking the astrophysicist's visi-screen. He did not anticipate meeting Boyd, for he had checked his rival's comings and goings carefully.

With quick precision he placed the minute, delicate tube directly behind the visi-screen. Then, without undue haste, he left the hotel at the underground level, and took a vacuo-car to the station nearest his laboratory.

Once inside his workshop, Malin removed his mask and tunic and threw them into his atomic fuel chamber where they would be reduced to infinitely small particles, and used to power his generator. With loving pride he checked his apparatus. He traced all the connections to their final destination —a ring of cavonite.

Into the center of this ring he would direct a beam of electronic particles. They would disappear into a sub-etheric space channel, and reappear in all their deadliness from the little tube behind Boyd's screen!

Tom Boyd was a creature of strict routine. Every evening at 7:00 P.M. he sat in front of the screen, enjoying the latest scientific newscast. Tonight, he would miss that pleasure.

It was now 6:55 and Malin was ready. It gave him intense satisfaction to realize that he was not in the least bit nervous. His only emotion was regret that he would have to play it safe and destroy his new machine. He regretted that he would be denied an opportunity to really investigate a completely new means of energy transportation. He was not convinced, for example, that he had the real explanation of why the space inside the ring became misty and seemed to twist and warp.

It was 7:00 P.M. The time had come. Malin pushed the button. He saw the pale green energy beam dart to the center of the ring! It was Malin's last observation before he fell, impaled on a weapon of shining whiteness that had come out of nowhere to rip his chest apart.

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GAMEL'S BODY was found by a white hunter who did not know that the densely shadowed part of the woods was taboo. Gamel's followers saw that he had come to his death in his own *Hounfort*, without any indication of physical violence. They were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had been defeated by the superior power of *Houngan* Dorsema. It was easy to realize that he had been killed by some powerful voodoo spirit, for everyone could see the pale green light that shone from his body—a light which neither flickered nor grew dim.

The death of Conrad Malin created two sensations. To the vast majority of the people of that future age, it was horrifying to even think of death by violence. But to a smaller and more select group of anthropologists and antiquarians the greater sensation was in discovering that the death weapon was a carved bone knife at least one thousand years old.

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teragram

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

There's nothing very disturbing about daydreams of children. But Margaret "nightdreamed" in daylight, on a black road to evil.

A STRANGE, inexplicable silence had settled down over the classroom. It was late in the afternoon, and the students no longer seemed restless—eager to escape to the freedom of the sweltering street. Instead, a thick lethargy had come upon them. It even extended to the teacher, who kept shaking her narrow head with its little black curls from side to side, as if to banish her languor by physical means, and with the quick petulance of a martyr to duty.

It was abnormally quiet, except for the monotone of one dispirited student reciting, and the crisp snap of the teacher's interruptions. Not even a whisper stirred the silence. The students were far too torpid to desire an exchange of confidences. Tinkling bells from an ice-cream cart jingled into the distance, and far away a lawnmower hummed meditatively.

Margaret basked near the open window, luxuriating in the golden feel of the sun on her bare arms and legs. She bent her head forward, so the genial rays would

If our correspondence is any criterion—and we sincerely believe it is—our readers have come to expect a very special kind of enchantment from Evelyn Smith. The lyrical beauty implicit in all of her stories is so brilliantly intertwined with para-psychology, the nostalgia of robots, and wonder children with astronomical I. Q.'s that each new story seems like a facet of some unbelievably wondrous gem. If you'd like to pass straight to that gem's darkling core — well, here's the key. Teragram!

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stroke the back of her neck, where the tawny hair was cut short and grew to a point.

Intense contentment swirled through her veins, beating rhythmically in the new blood that swelled her body. She wrote in her open notebook, carefully forming each letter: "Margaret. Margaret. Margaret."

And, because this bored her momentarily — although she would come back to it again and again— she reversed the letters. "Teragram. Teragram. Teragram."

She drew—not pictures but meaningless little designs which, she felt obscurely, had some meaning after all, a meaning that was just a little beyond her. Some day, as with all learning, she would understand. Meanwhile, she was young. She had time to wait.

All the time in the world.

There was one design in particular—a five-pointed star—that gave her great pleasure. It had to be drawn in a very special way, without lifting the pen from the paper. She drew several stars in this manner and experienced immense satisfaction.

A big iridescent fly, resplendently blue-green and gold, buzzed inquisitively over the desk, attracted by the rich smell of the ink. She brushed it away.

"I am Margaret," she said to herself, thrilled with the secret knowledge of her own identity. "Yesterday I wasn't Margaret—at least, not the same Margaret. And tomorrow—Who knows what I will be tomorrow?"

She gazed at the white skin of her arm admiringly. Once she'd been distressed because she could not tan, because her skin had retained a milky, almost story-book fairness, no matter how much she exposed herself to the sun. Now she realized that her whiteness was not only beautiful but right. It was the way she should be.

Already she seemed to feel her dress straining against her chest, and deep within her something seemed to whisper that, like chrysalis into butterfly, the change would be sudden, and immediate instead of gradual, as it was with human beings.

"I am becoming someone new and wonderful," she thought pleasurably. "I am Margaret. And I am thirteen."

And again she wrote "Margaret" and then "Teragram." Then, after a little thought, she added "Thirteen" . . . and the exciting five-pointed star with all the points connected by lines through the center.

"Margaret!"

The voice was not the delicious whispering of her own mind. It came from outside, and was stern, peremptory, and brusque.

"Margaret!" the teacher repeated, more loudly. "Will you pay attention to me?"

Margaret lifted her eyes—large and green they were and a trifle protuberant—and stared at the

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teacher. "I'm sorry," she said, in a voice as soft and rich as clotted cream. But there was no real regret in it.

The teacher's voice sharpened antagonistically. "We were discussing Joan of Arc, Margaret. I asked what you could tell us about her."

Margaret's words were spaced sullenly apart from each other, as if dragging them out was an ordeal quite hateful to her. "She was a witch," she said. "The English burned her."

She lowered her head so that the warm sunlight would fall upon her neck again, and half-closed her eyes, composing herself for a return to her ecstacy of contentment.

The teacher's thin lips curled. "They *said* she was a witch. But of course she wasn't a real witch. Well, Margaret? Was she? Answer me!"

Margaret raised her head. The movement coppered the top of her hair with sunlight, and set little flamelike reflections dancing in her eyes. She stared at the teacher through slitted lids.

"Of course she wasn't a real witch," she said, "or they wouldn't have been able to burn her!"

Amusement rustled through the comatose class.

"Margaret!" The teacher rapped sharply with her pencil on the desk, although actually there had been no disturbance. "What nonsense is this?"

"But—no." The reply came even more slowly, as if the mouth and the vocal apparatus were Margaret's, but not the words themselves. "I was wrong. The witch lives on, but the body can be burned! So," Margaret concluded magnanimously, "Joan may have been a real witch, after all. But not a very good one."

The class laughed sleepily.

"Margaret!" The teacher's voice shook. So did the lower part of her face, where the flesh hung loose in spite of her thinness. It was not a pleasant sight and Margaret shut her eyes to avoid it.

"There are no such things as witches!" the teacher said, vehemently. "Joan of Arc was a blessed saint!"

"My great-great-great—I don't know how great, but *very* far back —grandmother was a witch," Margaret murmured, opening her eyes a little again. "The English burned her too, even though they were her own people. And she was no saint." The corners of her full pink lips quivered. "Truly, no one would ever call her a saint!"

The teacher's face pinched in disapproval. "I must speak to your mother about stuffing your head with stories like that!" she rasped. "Parents don't realize—"

With a sudden, startling gesture Margaret struck away the bluebottle fly that circled ardently about her head. "And she did not die either!" she declared angrily. "You can burn a witch. You can say that she does not exist. But neither will stop her from existing. She goes

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on and on, and there is nothing you or your kind can do to stop her!"

"Margaret, that will be enough!" the teacher shrilled. And, in an undertone, but not so low that the class could not catch the words, "Insolent! An intolerable child! I really will have to have a talk with her mother very soon."

Margaret lapsed into her torpor. Warm sunlight bathed her young body, and tiny rivulets of perspiration trickled down her temples and stung her eyes with warm saltiness. "Margaret," she wrote mechanically. "Teragram. Thirteen." And she drew several exciting stars, and other figures.

Oh, it was good to be Margaret, to be thirteen! Why it was so uniquely good, she could not be sure. Perhaps everyone felt that way upon becoming thirteen . . .

Perhaps it was only natural.

But this she did know: her mother had *not* told her about that other Margaret so far back in time. Way, way back it was—two, three, four, five hundred years. A very long time. Her mother had said there was a legend that one of her remote ancestors had been a witch, but that was all . . .

How had she known? And why had she wanted to strike the teacher dead for saying Joan of Arc was a saint?

Did it matter?

The sun's rays grew hotter, hotter, burning almost. She tried to move out of its range but it was almost as if she were bound hand and foot.

Bound . . .

THE HEAT of the fire was growing agonizingly intense. The faggots around her feet were all ablaze now, and soon the flames would touch the beautiful white skin of which she had been so proud. They would burn her beautiful body too. Would she ever again get a body as smooth and as lovely? All that whiteness to char, to shrivel and turn black. Such a pity!

But there was no one to pity Margaret of Brentleigh except herself, nor were there any gods to whom she might pray. Her gods had no more power to help her than the breeze which blew smoke into her face.

It was a curious thing. The draught was chilly on her cheeks and forehead, and yet she was burning. She could feel the heat of the approaching flames, but inside she was as cold as ice. Through the acrid smoke that rose thick in her nostrils she could still smell the dirt and the sweat and the dung and the perfume that pervaded the courtyard—all of the familiar odors she would never smell again on earth in that particular combination.

She tried to turn her face away, but she was too tightly bound to move even her head. The ropes bit deep into her flesh, but it would stay soft and white now for such a little time that the marring

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red weals were of no importance.

One of the bowmen laughed at her coughing. Others began circling about the fire, their white teeth and the bright arrows they wore under their belts glinting in the light of the flames. It wasn't every day that they could enjoy the spectacle of a young and beautiful witch being burned, her body so starkly naked that they could watch every quiver as it slowly charred.

It was known to everyone who watched that the cries of a witch burning were celestial music to give pleasure to God-fearing folk.

Only she would *not* scream. She'd be damned if she'd give them that satisfaction—and she laughed a little at her blasphemous choice of words.

Beyond the bowmen, motionless on his black stallion, his face as rigid as one of the statues in the cathedral his family's gold had helped to build . . . sat John Aleyn. The sombre cloak in which he was wrapped hid the raven-dark, curly hair on which she had so doted, and in the leaping light of the fire his carven face seemed almost that of an old man.

Yet he was but one-and-twenty —scarcely five years her senior.

It had been said that should a witch love truly her undoing would follow as quickly as the cooling of her paramour's ardor and so it had turned out, as she had known it would. But did he think that by burning her body he could save his soul? The stupid, cowardly fool! He was wrong, wrong—his soul was already pledged to eternal fire!

She opened her flame-red mouth and laughed, so defiantly and scornfully that even the bowmen were taken aback. Some crossed themselves and she thought she saw a momentary change of expression on Aleyn's face, a flicker in his glass-gray eyes. But it might only have been the leaping of the firelight.

"What ails you, wench?" asked the nearest bowman, a man who often in her infancy had dandled her on his knee, and who now made as if he did not even know her. "Do you mock the fire that will consume you now and forever?"

"Do you think you can kill a witch with a little fire?" she demanded in her turn, her eyes blazing with fury.

"Fire has killed witches before," he said sullenly. "It will kill you as well."

"The body, yes! But never the rest of me. Watch yourselves! You, Jenkin, and you—and you! Watch yourselves and your wives, and your children. Even your cattle will not be safe, for my curse is upon you, now and forever."

The bowman stepped back in horror, his cheeks pallid in the firelight. "I' Faith, my lord," he said to Aleyn, "there's no man readier than I to do the Church's bidding. But I love my good wife and my little ones well, and I would not—"

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"Pay the witch no heed," the nobleman said, his face still impassive.

Yet once he had loved her. It was of his own will that he'd slept in her arms, and she had been a maid the first time and he the only man who ever had touched her. Ay, and the only *being* who had ever touched her, despite what the folk said. But they had turned him against her, and he had betrayed her, as she had known he would. One of the penalties of being a witch was that you could take but little pleasure in the present, knowing all too well what the future would bring.

He had betrayed her to save his own skin, had turned upon her so that he would not also be accused and burn with her. And watching from the tower window mocking her torment and despair, was brown Allison, the Abbot's ugly niece who was to wed Aleyn at Whitsuntide. To wed Aleyn for all eternity.

But Aleyn would find the wedding worse than the burning he'd escaped. Had there been another man of gentle birth willing to espouse the ardent, black-tressed toad, he might have joined Margaret at the stake, for all of his betrayals and protestations. And the Abbot would have made good use of the gold and broad acres that would have fallen forfeit to the Church.

"Pay the witch no heed," Aleyn repeated. "When a witch burns, she dies, and her soul goes to everlasting torment." He crossed himself. "So the Church has said."

"A witch never dies!" Margaret declared, her voice firm through the pain that was beginning to sear her body. "I shall live again and again. I have a daughter, as you know—your own blood as well as mine. She has been hid away where you will never find her for all of your searching, and she will be a witch. Yes, and of her children, another shall be a witch, and, in each succeeding generation still another as she grows to womanhood, shall bear my image. Not from mother to daughter will the heritage pass, but from a chosen one to the next who is best fitted to be sorcery's handmaiden. Thus will my spirit pass down through the ages, gaining strength with each century. How does it feel to sire a line of witches, my Lord? Does it not please you well?"

The young man's old face was still, save for the movement of his lips as he ordered: "Throw more faggots on the fire."

The flames leaped high, becoming a burning, tearing agony in the body that was, regrettably, human. Fire . . . heat . . . pain . . .

MARGARET screamed.

"Margaret!" The teacher, alarmed, half-rose from her chair. "What's the matter, child?"

Margaret rubbed her eyes, and looked up dazzedly. "It's nothing. I'm sorry. The sun was so hot it—it made me feel dizzy."

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The class giggled with amusement, and relief.

The teacher sank back in her seat. "No wonder! You should have had more sense than to let it beat right down on you like that. You might have gotten a sunstroke. Will one of you boys draw the blind?"

One of the students obeyed.

Now Margaret's face was obscured by shadow. But the shadow was a warm caressing obscurity, and the face half lost in it was still Margaret's. She was Margaret and something more. She had known it was something more when the strange, the new, the almost frightening sensation had first come to her. Only it was no longer frightening. Now she knew she would be a witch when she became a woman. But—when would she become a woman?

Margaret of Brentleigh had died at sixteen, already a mother. Girls had become women early in those days. Probably *that* Margaret would have considered a thirteen-year-old girl a woman grown.

The newest Margaret gazed with pleasure at her curving forearm and the slender, milk-pale fingers that wrote "Margaret, Margaret, Teragram, Teragram . . ." and went on to draw stars and other signs and figures less comprehensible to her conscious mind, but not — she realized now — mere doodlings.

"Almost as if they didn't belong to me," she thought, watching the diligent fingers. "But still I can control them. I can control . . . control . . ."

The ubiquitous bluebottle fly whirred around her face again, buzzing amorously.

"Pest!" she shrieked, but quietly, inside of her mind, for she was still, not exactly afraid, but a little hesitant of the teacher. "I wish you were dead!"

The insect fell to the desk and lay there . . . stiff, unmoving.

She prodded the little body with her pen. It was dead all right.

Dead. She was a witch. A full-fledged witch! Power and control . . . hers. She spread her slender hands wide to grasp an almost tangible ecstasy from the air.

"Margaret!" the teacher's voice came—sharp, hostile. "Margaret, you're not paying attention again!"

The voice was ugly; the teacher was ugly—and old. Both should not be permitted to exist. For Margaret loved pretty things. Young things.

Margaret opened her heavy-lidded green eyes wide and looked speculatively at the teacher . . .

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the mech fighter

by . . . Stuart McIver

There was blood and sand, fire and fury in man's hatred of the machine. And often—death as well.

CARK STRETCHED out on the long wooden bench in front of the lockers and yawned luxuriously.

"You always could relax when you had to," said Shell, the locker room attendant. He was a small, compactly-built man, and he spoke with a slightly clipped accent.

"You learn things, Shell," Cark replied. "When your reflexes slow down and your stamina starts to go, believe me, you learn all the shortcuts. You get to know how important it is to relax up to the time of the fight."

"Like a pressure bath today?" Shell asked.

Cark nodded. "I think I'd better, Shell. It's getting more difficult to get myself ready for these fights. One fight real soon the great man's going to have to call it quits."

"Cark, you'll go on forever," said Shell. "I can't even picture Mech fighting without you."

Cark smiled and thought, *I don't hate the machine any more and when you stop hating the machine you stop being a good Mech fighter.*

"You were one of Rigg's original group and you're the only one that's

So vigorously executed, so novel and exciting is Stuart McIver's handling of an audacious science-fantasy theme that you may be surprised to learn, as we were, that THE MECH FIGHTER *is his first science-fiction story and his first science-fiction sale. Mr. McIver has spent most of his twelve years in the newspaper business as a sportswriter, but that, we suspect, will surprise no one coming under the spell of this wholly breathtaking yarn.*

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left. The only man in the game today that goes all the way back to that first year," Shell said admiringly.

"And now I'm forty-seven years old, Shell, and I think I need a pressure bath."

The vast arena was built of white sun-mirroring plastic as spotless as a mausoleum. It could handle comfortably crowds up to a quarter of a million, and had once even drawn a throng of three hundred thousand shrieking spectators to watch the battle of man versus the machine on the sand below.

But as a merciless sun filtered through an overcast of leaden gray clouds, Galber, manager of Plastic Stadium, Inc., gazed grimly out his office window at the meagre gathering of eighty-seven thousand men and women who sat in the comfortably upholstered seats. He was a dark-browed man with massive shoulders and a bulging waistline that forced his tunic out so far in front that it caught a steady stream of ashes from his cigar.

"The mech business is going to hell, Rango," he said to a thin, gimlet-eyed man beside him. "We can't stand it off much longer at this rate."

"It's mean, Chief," the other agreed. "We're caught in the middle. I can't get anybody around at National Sports to admit it but I think they deliberately changed the specifications, slowed 'em down just a fraction."

"It figures," Galber said. "They were over-capitalized, and they needed dough. So they've turned out a whole crop of watered-down Mechs. The way we're going our whole supply will be smashed in another three weeks. In three weeks —maybe two—we'll have to buy up another batch. And what do we use for credit?"

"Chief, I think we both know what we've got to do."

Galber relit his long, fat cigar and smiled knowingly. "You have a suggestion?"

"It's no suggestion, Chief. Look, the Mechs have lost thirty-one straight fights. That means the fans have sat and cheered while thirty-one Mechs were hammered to pieces. But it also means a week has passed without a man being killed by a Mech. They're wild, that mob out there. They come to see the Mechs smashed. But ever so often they like to see a little human blood. And they haven't seen any in over a week."

"Sure, I know. There ought to be at least one man killed every day for a good gate," agreed Galber. "But I'm still waiting to hear your suggestion. We could, of course, dope one of the fighters."

"Too risky, Galber. You never know when somebody's going to call for a blood test—some member of the family, some old friend."

"So?"

"We've got a man fighting here this meeting who's over the hill," said Rango. "A man who's not going to be around much longer

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anyway. But he's a great name, maybe the greatest ever in Mech fighting."

"Cark?"

"Cark. He's slipped down to Double A Mechs now. Everybody knows he's slowing down. If he got it nobody would ever suspect anything fishy. And if he got it this afternoon it would be the talk of the whole world. Think of the publicity. We'd pack 'em in for the rest of the meet."

"Cark's a shrewd cookie. How would you go about it?"

"Simple," said Rango. "Cark has been fighting Double A for three years now. It's been so long since he faced Triple A Mechs that he couldn't handle one."

Galber stared at him.

"So you're going to slip in a Triple A Mech."

"No, a Triple A would be too easy to trace. The Commission would catch that. I'm going to step up the voltage on a Double A Mech. I've got one here with a faulty rear plate. I spotted it last week. I tinkered with it a little and I know how to handle it."

"What about the Commission?" asked Galber.

"They're a bunch of political flunkies. They'd never spot anything. I'll get 'em drunk anyway, just to play it safe."

"I don't think that particular way of sending a fighter to his death has ever been tried before, Rango."

"Nope, but this just happens to be one of those rare Mechs with a faulty plate, the first I've ever seen. It gave me the idea."

II

The warm bubbles bouncing off his tired body were tingling, exciting and at the same time relaxing. But Cark was not at ease. His muscles had slackened beneath the gentle pounding, but his mind was moving much too rapidly.

He was finding it difficult to relax in the pressure bath, to give himself up to the dreamy haze that conserved a fighter's energy until he was summoned to the Mech battle. And once that summons came, once out on the sand he was finding it harder and harder to drive himself to the mental alertness a man needed to survive. When you quit hating the machine, it was time to quit Mech fighting, he told himself grimly.

The warm bubbles kept bombarding him and finally drowsiness crept upon him, and with it the rest he needed so badly. He drifted off in a deep sleep that carried with it only fleeting memories of the virile international sport of Mech fighting.

Mech fighting had its origin during the administration of the Coalition group, a moderate political amalgamation which backed continued technological progress but at the same time sought improved relations between man and the machine. The Coalition group was the first to face up squarely to the stark fact that man hated

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the machine with all his heart and soul. He worked with the machine, he took the machine forward and went forward with it. But in his secret thoughts man hated the machine, every intricately moving part, every nut, every bolt.

Ankak, deputy secretary of the newly-organized Department of H-M Relations, was the official who first realized the social gains which would inevitably follow actual combat between man and the machine. For the man who fought and the crowd that watched, he reasoned, such an event would have a decided therapeutic value. It would release stored-up tensions and bring improved mental health to the empire.

A student of antiquity, Ankak patterned the new sport after the Spanish bull fight, with many variations, of course. In fact, the first fights were billed as *Man versus the Mechanized Bull,* later called simply the Mech. And in the popular mind antiquity paid off.

The original Mech was a rectangular metal box five feet long with two wheels in front, and one in back and with razor-sharp horns protruding from what mechanically corresponded to its head. It moved at thirty-five miles an hour, but had little maneuverability. After its first lunge missed, it was an easy mark for a fighter as it went by. A good fighter could hit the rear end of the Mech with his mace and gradually jar the mechanism out of order. That meant an easy kill, which took the form of smashing the Mech to pieces with the mace.

Man won virtually all the early Mech fights, due to the inferior design of the machines. The Mech II proved a "beast" of another color. He was stepped up to forty miles per hour, and his maneuverability was so great and his horns so sharp that he killed thirty-three of the first thirty-five fighters he faced.

Cark had been the first man to discover the weakness of Mech II and render it a relatively impotent foe. The Mech's initial charge was fast, its pursuit unrelenting. But Cark reasoned that the Mech could be beaten if he ducked away just as it reached him and knocked off first one horn and then the other. That bold new strategy not only took away the Mech's slashing power but threw the mechanism's timing off badly.

At this point Rodek, who had succeeded Ankak, tried an innovation that almost wrecked the sport. He went all out for the Machine Age and replaced the sharp cutting horns with radioactive rods. Thus any attempt to destroy the Mech by hitting the horns meant death to the fighter. This gave the machine an overwhelming advantage since it restricted a fighter's hitting area. Over two thousand men were killed in four months.

The public finally forced the government to abandon the Atomic Mech and in so doing crystallized the sport into the classic pattern

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it had followed ever since. A man who has been hooked by an atomic rod does not bleed. He may faint or he may just grow weak and have to grope his way back to shelter, which was possible since Atomic Mech was slow in pursuit. The fighters invariably died in the stadium infirmary before a small gathering of doctors and nurses, never in the arena before a quarter of a million spectators. There was no real drama, nor any dignity, to death at the horns of an Atomic Mech.

It was then that the government realized for the first time that for maximum pleasure at a Mech fight the human being had to die on the spot with a maximum of blood. So the horns of the Mech were sharpened with bludinium and coated with acidol paint. All fighters were forced to appear wearing only skin-tight shorts and were smeared with a sheen of glossy white paint to afford a striking background when blood began to flow from their almost invariably fatal wounds.

Thus was ushered in the Golden Era of Mech fighting. The balance became perfect. A good fighter figured to win but a spectator could count on at least one sanguinary death each day. He could also count on seeing a human being like himself destroy machines every day, smashing them to bits with his mace until all that was left was a rubble of metal and plastic parts, oil and a few battered electronic fuses.

To a spectator the two supreme moments were the final destruction of a Mech and the bleeding to death of a man on the white sand.

Cark won his reputation as the greatest artist of his generation solely because of his skill in smashing Mechs. Others were more adroit than he in outmaneuvering the formidable mechanical killer and disabling it. But Cark was a master at reducing it to rubble with powerful, perfectly-conceived strokes. No other man smashed with the force and abandon of Cark.

The reason was simply that Cark hated the machine more relentlessly and consumingly than did the others. Cark's mother had been mangled to death on the atomic-rocket assembly line and his sister and brother had been run over when only children by a transcontinental landplane. And his wife, the beautiful Rhoda, had been rendered sterile by working with a food radiation machine. Now there could be no children for Cark and Rhoda, only an empty loneliness in the years ahead.

Two thousand, three hundred and forty-two Mechs had paid for the sorrow which the machine had brought to the family of Cark. But now as he grew older, and softer, his hatred had begun to wane.

Cark stirred from uneasy dreams, and signalled Shell to release him from the bath. He felt rested as he slipped on his tunic and his robe, and stretched again to bring back

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the muscle tone. From the locker room he walked up the stairs to the section of the stadium reserved for the fighters' wives. Rhoda, still beautiful despite her prematurely gray hair, occupied a place of honor on the front row. She smiled as she turned to greet him.

"How's the champ feeling today?" she asked, a tender solicitude in her voice.

"Old, Rhoda, old," he replied.

"Yes, an old man like you," she said, in feigned mockery. "I just don't see how you can hold the love of a really beautiful woman."

He grinned at her. "I'm not that old, Rhoda—just slowing up a little."

Her lips tightened and the levity went out of her eyes. "Cark, I've got news for you, the most wonderful news in the world. The food radiation people have—"

"Yes?"

"They've developed a treatment to cure every single person who was sterilized by contact with the radiation machine. It's a new X-3 machine and I can start treatments next week. We can have children, Cark."

He looked at the light shining in her eyes. As they glazed over with tears the thought that had been turning over and over finally meshed within his brain.

He bent suddenly and kissed her. "Rhoda, this is no sport for a family man," he whispered. "I'm giving it up. Today is my last Mech fight."

"Giving it up?" his wife asked.

"Yeah, I'll get a job coaching Mech, or maybe hook up with a big sporting goods house. We'll get along. I owe it to you—and to the kids."

"Oh, Cark, I'm so happy," she cried, her arms tightening about his shoulders.

She's afraid, thought Cark. *She has been all along. That's why she's gray at thirty-two. I should have got out long ago.* And then suddenly her fear came through to him, more overpowering than when he had faced his first Mech as a green kid of seventeen. *The last day,* he thought, *the last Mech fight. What if I lose? What if this is the day the Mech finally makes me pay as I've made it pay down through the years? Will I meet death without flinching?*

He kissed her again, firmly and reassuringly and went back to the locker room. His stomach felt tight and hollow and sweat was beading his forehead as he groped his way to the bench.

"Shell, I've got the shakes. What can you do for me? I can't get weak now."

The small, wiry locker room attendant walked over to the champion and vigorously slapped his face. "I don't like fighters that are scared. I hate like hell to associate with fighters that go yellow."

Cark stiffened and leaped to his feet.

Shell smiled. "You're all right now. You just needed a kick in the

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tail. I'll give you some salt tablets before you go on."

Cark looked at his watch. He had twenty-five minutes left. He opened his locker and started to dress for the fight—his last big fight.

III

Walsch, the Mech writer for the INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER, looked profoundly bored as he talked into his recorder from high in the spacious press box. He glanced down again at his notes as the recorder rephrased his observations and returned the printed comments to him for approval.

First bout, Hesk versus Double A Mech, the notes read. *Mech seems slow, poor reflexes. Hesk, promising young fighter, performs some acceptable leads while drawing Mech into well-planned traps. Hits Mech nicely with mace while going to left. Can't seem to go to his right. Won't be ready for Triple A till he corrects this. Polishes off Mech in fourteen minutes and twenty-five seconds with good looping right hand power. Broke off right horn of Mech and then jarred inner mechanism out of line, thus permitting final smashup. Good, workmanlike fighter but there's no art in his work. Worth keeping an eye on, though.*

Sometimes they improve fast.

Walsch took a sip of the warm beer Plastic Stadium, Inc., provided for the gentlemen of the press. "What a scorcher," he said aloud. "I'd hate to be down there fighting."

He took another sip of beer and then turned on his microphone to start a new series of notes.

Second bout, Cark versus Double A Mech. Cark now coming onto field, looks remarkably trim, still erect, slender, graceful as a cat. Slowing down now but still carries himself with the class the younger fighters just don't have. Shame he had to drop back to Double A but his reflex tests show he can no longer handle Triple A. Cark salutes judge with mace, bows toward the box of the Athletic Commission and walks toward the fighting zone. The old-time graciousness still there. Mech released from far gateway, needs long trip to this side of arena. Highly irregular, should always come from nearest gateway. Doesn't really matter, though. Mech seems to be moving fast, very fast. Cark leads, then draws away and spins out. Cark seems afraid of Mech's speed, wasn't bold at all.

Mech coming back fast. Cark, why Cark runs, doesn't even offer with his mace. Crowd booing now. Cark is scared. Something's wrong for Cark to be scared. Mech gets up speed again. Extremely fast Mech, but no excuse for Cark putting on bad show like this. After all, he owes something to the public that made him . . .

The Mech was coming back very fast, and Cark whirled away too soon for a good blow with his

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mace. The boos were loud now, the first really loud shouts of anger and disapproval he had ever known. Cark, the champion of champions, bowing out now to a chorus of boos, bowing out to a hopped up Mech with razor-sharp horns!

With a roar the Mech came back again and Cark finally made a play for it. After a fast lead he spun away quickly and on the pivot swung hard with his mace. The blow was a solid one to the upper left plate, but unfortunately this was not a vital area. The Mech was back on him instantly, and Cark's second desperate swing caught the charging machine in almost the same place.

It's no good. I've got to hit him where it hurts, he thought. *He's too fast for me! I can't connect.*

Mustn't think about it.

The Mech's last charge had been so strong that its overrun carried it nearly twenty yards past Cark. It had to turn around and gather new speed for the trip back.

"This is a Triple-A Mech," Cark screamed his discovery aloud but not a voice could hear him as the gears meshed, and the motor rumbled.

The Mech bore down on him with a deafening roar. Cark moved boldly in and swung viciously but the blow glanced harmlessly off the tip of the Mech's right horn. Then the horn caught him in the thigh, stinging him with a blinding pain as the acid began to work.

Cark's blood showed instantly against the white gloss and the crowd screamed. Most of them had never before seen Cark's blood and they leaped to their feet for the kill they sensed was coming.

"Kill him, kill him, kill him! *Kill, kill, kill, kill!*"

Cark could hear the crowd brutally and mercilessly clamoring for the machine to kill him, but he gritted his teeth and braced himself for the next charge. The searing pain in his leg was already dangerously curtailing his mobility. The Mech rumbled toward him again, spurting forward with renewed speed. Cark, his reflexes slowing now, his wounded leg rapidly losing its strength, made one last great slash at the untiring metal horror.

He caught it squarely above the control center. The crowd cheered wildly, knowing they could count on Cark to drag out the delicious last moments of the conflict. The Mech turned abruptly and roared back down on him again, its chrome flashing blindingly, its acid-coated cutting edges itching for his flesh.

Cark faked his lead and then stepped in for another blow at the control center. Again he hit his mark and spun away.

Then he felt it, suddenly, searingly, like the end of time coming upon him in a lightning flash. He knew the burning pain across the belly meant the Mech had gotten him. His legs gave way and he fell to the sand and lay there bleeding his life away while the crowd above him pleaded with the ma-

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chine to come back and finish off the human being.

Blood they had hoped for and now they were seeing the blood of the great Cark. The machine was turning now, its gears shifting the horns for the rotary motion that would destroy the helpless man on the sand.

Cark lifted his head, and waited for the last charge of all . . .

In the wives' box Rhoda lay slumped over the rail, motionless.

In the press box Walsch of the INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER barked excitedly, "And now the Mech has its gears ready, it's maneuvering for position, it's getting up speed, it's making the final charge."

Cark saw death coming in a gleam of chromium and heard it in the mesh of gears and the grinding of a motor. And then the grinding became a skipping and then a whimpering and powerful knives hovered just over him as, suddenly, the motor blew up and the Mech sputtered to a smoking halt.

Cark's eyes closed behind a red shadow. The Mech stood its ground, steaming and spitting.

The stretchers bore Cark into the infirmary. The stitching of the damaged organs started at once and new blood was pumped into his veins as he lay on the table.

When he finally opened his eyes, Rhoda was there.

"Cark, honey," she said and then was silent as he took her hand.

"You're great, champ," said Walsch of the INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER. "You won a couple of big battles."

"I wasn't great. But then that wasn't a Double A Mech I was fighting," said Cark.

"Don't worry about that," said the Mech writer. "Rango and Galber are already in jail. When the Mech blew up, it didn't blow up because you hit it in a sensitive spot. It just blew up because a Double A Mech can't stand Triple A voltage. That's how the men from the National Sports Commission found out it had been tampered with."

"I used to think the machine was my enemy," said Cark.

"Don't talk, honey, you're going to be all right," said Rhoda. "Old family man," she chided, gently, and kissed him on the brow.

If you're in the mood for a truly exciting mystery story treat we urge that you hasten to the nearest newsstand for your copy of THE SAINT DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE. *The June issue is now on sale, and in it you'll meet* THE ROMANTIC MATRON, *a brand-new Saint yarn that rates among Leslie Charteris' best. And accompanying that ebullient saga of incisive, colorful crime are a dozen top-echelon thrillers by such masters of suspense as Sax Rohmer, P. G. Wodehouse, Q. Patrick, Edgar Wallace, Frederick Nebel.*

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pass the oxygen

by . . . F. B. Bryning

A cave-in on the dark, airless surface of the moon calls for a very stubborn breed of men—and golden nuggets of valor.

THROUGH THE helmet earphones came the voice of foreman electrician Calvert.

"All correct, Jim! Close the box and come inside."

Jim Miller fought against the dreamlike sense of unreality he always felt when working inside a space suit in the soundless vacuum of the moon's surface. Part of it was a feeling of remoteness from his own hands—of detachment from his tools. His wrench jarred in his hand as it gripped the nut, but there came no clatter through the airless void outside. Whatever his hands did out there his ears heard only the sounds made in his private atmosphere inside the suit—his own breathing, the sibilant whisper of the oxygen feed, the creaking of elbow and knee joints, the occasional message in his radio earphones.

Miller tightened the last nut, sealed the junction box, and straightened his back. The harsh black and white of the rugged moonscape, without softening halftones or gradations of shadow such as the air-diffused light of Earth

So conscientiously and imaginatively recorded are F. B. Bryning's stirring documentary portrayals of the human struggle for survival on worlds more bleak and pitiless than Earth's arctic tundra that they result in full-length portraits of individual men more rugged and distinctive than any hitherto found in science fiction. Our hat is off again to this brilliant young Australian writer whose work has delighted so many of our readers.

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would have provided, increased the sense of unreality.

He turned, and along the front of the many-celled, double-walled, plastiglass window which sealed the mouth of the newly excavated cave, trudged toward the nearer of the two airlocks.

Underfoot, the ground quivered soundlessly. Alarmed, Miller swung about, his gaze sweeping the cliff wall around the perimeter of the window. Then he leapt for his life . . .

A huge boulder, bounding past, grazed his shoulder. Leisurely, in the moon's weak gravity, it fell to the ground and bounced again. A rain of debris pattered on his helmet and shoulders as his leap carried him nearly thirty feet away. Teetering a few steps, he saw that a small landslide was occurring at one side of the cave mouth, bringing down part of the cliff outside and some of the cave wall inside.

Keeping a wary eye aloft as the last streams of dust and rubble trickled down, Miller loped back to the transparent wall to inspect an ominous distortion in the metal framework and some of the cells. Even as he approached he could see frost spreading along several joints, showing positively that air was escaping.

Inside there was frantic activity. Visor against plastiglass, and gloved hands shading each side of his helmet, he could see John Calvert, one arm pointing and the other beckoning. The three other men were clambering over the huge stacks of building materials and equipment which had been delivered on to the spacious concrete floor before the sealing window had been erected. They began tearing open kegs of caulking compound, bales of rockwool, and rolls of canvas lagging.

They moved freely in shirts and shorts, their space suits having been laid out handily and ready in a cleared area near one of the airlocks. For not until the builders and fitters had partitioned the cave into a honeycomb of airtight rooms and sections would it be really safe for men to live and work beyond jumping distance from their space suits. Only then could damage to the pressure seal of the cave, such as had now occurred, be isolated in a section or two, and the bulk of the cave's air retained.

Calvert turned, espied Miller staring at him from outside, and with a sweeping gesture, beckoned him in.

"Stay in your suit!" cried Calvert when Miller came through the airlock, his helmet off and under his arm. "You'll have to go for help. All our suits are buried under that landslide!"

"Can you reseal the entire cave?" Miller asked, breathing heavily.

"I don't know," Calvert replied. "I doubt it. There's seepage through the fallen rocks and several cells are sprung. It's a question whether we can hold in enough air until they bring help."

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"How long?" Miller wheezed.

Calvert gestured for silence as Evans came up, air pressure gauge in hand.

"We've lost forty-six ounces' pressure in three minutes," reported Evans. "At that rate we'll be down to two and a half pounds in about twelve minutes—perhaps fifteen minutes if the rate of loss slackens at all with reducing pressure."

"And at two and a half pounds —we're finished," murmured Calvert.

Blood-choked lungs—bleeding nostrils— distended eyeballs—bloated limbs—inevitable and torturing suffocation . . . Miller tried to drive the appalling thoughts from his mind.

"We can't expect help in less than fifteen minutes after they hear from us," said Calvert, "and it'll take Jim, here, four to six minutes to get around the hill so his radio can contact them."

"Too long by far," replied Evans. "We can't survive for ten minutes—or even five—without breathing, let alone what zero pressure will do to us. It's getting cold now . . . although freezing won't matter by the time—"

He stopped as Calvert laid a hand on his arm.

"Ten minutes without breathing!" Calvert echoed. "It has been done in a laboratory, although not without pressure . . ." He clapped Evans on the shoulder. "It's a long chance, Bob, but we'll have to try something like that. Get out the oxygen resuscitator, will you?"

As Evans made for the big First Aid cabinet, Calvert took Miller by the arm.

"Now take it easy, Jim, and listen to me carefully. You're our only hope. You must act fast and do exactly as I ask . . ."

Tensely he explained while Miller fitted his helmet back on with the visor open. "And tell 'em," Calvert finished, opening the inner hatch of the airlock, "it's most important to have that tanker open to space—and the 'dozer too —and for them all to be in space suits, ready to act fast. There'll be no time to work through airlocks!"

Banging the hatch after Miller, Calvert ran across to where Evans had the resuscitator case open. "Damn it, Bob! Only the small, one-man job! I was afraid of that. It'll have to do, but I'd like our chances better with three masks and feed lines instead of one."

"What makes you think it's any good at all, for four of us?"

"Come with me and I'll tell you." Snapping the case shut Calvert raced with it to where the two other men were vainly trying to stop the leaking window cells. "Never mind those leaks, boys!" he cried. "We haven't a chance that way. There's a better use for that caulking!"

Outside, stripped of weighted soles, tools, or needless equipment, Miller raced to take his space suit

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radio beyond the intervening spur of the hill so that he could make contact with Moonbase. He leapt like a frog, in long, low arcs of twenty to thirty feet at a time, cursing the seconds spent out of contact with the ground, landing on all fours to be in take-off crouch all the sooner, and driving ahead in as low a trajectory as possible.

The glare of the sunbaked Lunar crust was cut down by the polarized, ultra-violet resistant plastic of his visor, and the heat radiated from the ground beat unheeded against his insulated suit. But his exertions had him hot and gasping before he was half way. He turned up his oxygen supply and drove on.

He made good time, but it was with a desperate feeling of inadequacy at not doing better that he made his last leap up on to a ridge that put him into a direct line of sight with Moonbase.

"Calling Moonbase! Emergency! Calling Moonbase!"

Between great gasps he made contact, in a voice that left no doubt of the urgency of his appeal. It took three minutes to tell his tale, but the men at the base were in action before he had finished.

"Don't know," Miller snapped when they asked him what Calvert had in mind. "Just do as he says to the last detail—and we'll have a fighting chance. No time for questions when I left him. No time now. I've got to hurry back. Just remember—come fast, with open airlocks and all personnel in space suits, doctor included!"

"We're coming!"

Pressure was down to five pounds per square inch when Miller got back, to find two of his four companions flat on their backs, swathed like Egyptian mummies from groin to scalp, and the third, Samuels, bandaging himself in similar fashion with canvas lagging, and Calvert kneeling by the second man, giving him oxygen through the resuscitator.

"They're on their way," said Miller. "Started nearly five minutes ago." He noted with dismay the reedy sound of his own voice in the thin air. It was poor breathing, too, after his rich diet of oxygen of the past twelve minutes or so, which probably accounted for the fact that he did not yet have to pant and gasp like Calvert and Samuels.

"Good work, Jim," wheezed Calvert, his eyes on the watch he had strapped to the resuscitator. "No questions now—just listen. Keep your helmet on. Soon you'll have to close your visor, and you'll be our life-line when the air goes." He breathed rapidly several times. "We're gambling that we can beat decompression by plugging our eyes, ears, and noses with caulking compound and binding over with canvas lagging. And by binding our bodies from throat to groin we'll prevent rupture of internal organs and bloating by stomach gases—we hope. Legs and arms

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will have to take their chances . . ."

"But air — oxygen?" Miller smothered his concern and waited for Calvert to continue.

"There's a gag, like this, for each man's mouth." Calvert indicated a putty-like lump of mixed caulking compound and rockwool as big as a coconut in the hand of the man he was treating. "It's his own responsibility to keep his mouth sealed while not taking oxygen—like Evans, here."

A glance showed Miller that the other man, Evans, was holding a similar plug over his mouth.

"You, Jim," panted Calvert, "must feed each man oxygen in turn—ten litres a minute . . . But only for twenty-five seconds at a time, and then on to the next man, as quickly as possible." He stopped for a few straining breaths. "I'm now saturating their lungs with as much as they can take in ninety seconds. After his dose Evans has held his breath for nearly three minutes already. McVey is getting his, now . . . Samuels next."

"What about you, Jack?" protested Samuels, hoarsely. "You're not leaving yourself much time . . . to wrap up!"

Calvert handed the resuscitator to Miller. "I'll manage, Nat," he gasped. "You seal up."

Samuels eased himself over beside McVey, plugged his ears, nose, and eyes, and began to bandage his head.

Miller had fitted the mask over Samuels' mouth and was feeding him oxygen when Evans signalled by slapping his hand on the concrete floor. Calvert, glancing first at the watch on the resuscitator, went to him. Evans removed his mouth plug, exhaled, and gulped the thin air.

"How long?" he piped.

"Nearly three and a quarter minutes!" shouted Calvert into Evans' mouth. "We've got a chance!"

Through palate and face bones Evans heard. He relaxed and waited.

"Keep still!" warned Calvert. "Don't waste energy or you'll need more oxygen."

When McVey signalled, Calvert, breathing rapidly, again checked the time. He laid a hand on McVey's shoulder.

"Not quite three minutes!" he yelled into the latter's mouth. "Try to hold longer, next time." To Miller he added, "You might give Mac a few seconds extra—or step up the flow a bit. He can't hold it so well."

Miller nodded. "Jack—you're leaving it too late for yourself! You've got to wrap up!"

Calvert lifted his chin and looked with hard eyes at Miller. "There wasn't time for me from the start, Jim, if I was to get all these chaps shipshape. And the oxygen schedule won't allow another interval in the sequence to saturate me."

"There must be a way!" pro-

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tested Miller. "You've *got* to have a chance!"

"I can't wrap up before this air goes."

Miller's eyes were scanning desperately the ground about them. By the landslide he noticed something.

"You would have time to caulk and bind your head?"

"Yes." Calvert shrugged. "But what good would it do? I'm going behind those bales of hardboard so I won't make a—a spectacle of myself, and interrupt your work. 'Bye, Jim. Seal up—"

"Come back!" shouted Miller, and pointed to the pile of fallen rock. "Look at that big slide of sand held up behind the packing case. If you got alongside that case and pushed . . ."

"I get it, Jim. But there's still the oxygen. I tell you, it's no use!"

"I'll cut the dose to twenty seconds and increase the flow! Each man will only need to hold his breath for . . . about seventy seconds between doses . . . with four of you in the schedule. *Now get moving!*"

Miller took the resuscitator back to Evans and fitted the mask. As he opened the valve for the first of the twenty-seconds doses he closed the visor of his helmet.

Airlocks were open and all wore space suits in the rescue bulldozer and the trailing personnel tanker. Their radios said little, for each man was grim and strained. Each hoped, but none had any real belief in the possibility of men surviving for more than about fifteen seconds in the complete absence of breathable oxygen or atmospheric pressure. Each dreaded what he might see when they entered the cave.

As they rounded the spur of rock from which Miller had first called them, and came in sight of the glassed-over cave mouth, Medical Officer Cousens called Miller by radio.

"Thank God!" came Miller's exhausted voice. "Hurry! Drive right through the seal over near Airlock Two. I think we're holding out—but don't waste a second."

"We'll drive right through," answered Cousens, and since everyone was listening in he knew the driver would take that as an instruction. "But what must we do first? How *are* you holding out?"

"You'll see! What you do is rush the three men on the floor into the tanker, seal up and fill with oxygen to three pounds—fast! Resuscitate anyone needing it. Then unbind wrappings . . . Two men stay out with me to look after Calvert."

Approaching the cave mouth the 'dozer driver switched on his powerful searchlight to see better into the cave.

"No air there!" he exclaimed. "Look at those sharp shadows!"

He raised the blade of his machine to protect the pressure dome, and drove straight at the plastiglass. The sound of the impact

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came fairly clear, transmitted through the metal of the vehicles and the footwear of those aboard.

As they leapt from the open airlocks toward the three mummified figures on the ground, they saw the space-suited figure of Miller scuttling with the resuscitator towards the great pile of fallen rock and loose soil.

"Get those men inside and sealed up with three pounds of oxygen!" came Miller's voice. "Prepare to take in Calvert through the airlock in about ten minutes."

Two men followed Miller to where he was feeding oxygen to Calvert. Calvert's head and shoulders, caulked and bandaged from the collarbone up, protruded from a heap of sand, soil, and rock fragments.

"He had no time to bind his body," explained Miller, "so he pulled this rubble down on himself to hold pressure on his body. We've got to bind him from the shoulders down as we dig him out. Work fast! There's not too much oxygen left."

Inside the tanker Medical Officer Cousens, space helmet off, got up from his knees and looked down on the four naked men who squatted and lay on the floor, rubbing their limbs.

"You'll do," he commented with a grin. "John Calvert—that was a great piece of improvisation! Instead of four dead men we have two mild retching cases, one partial asphyxia, your own broken rib and abrasions, and four cases of dirty faces and acute pins-and-needles."

" 'Pins-and-needles!' " objected Evans. " 'Swords-and-sabres' is more like it."

"Those circulation pains will soon work off," consoled Cousens. "Just keep massaging where your legs and arms swelled against the bindings. How you thought you could get away with it, John, I don't know."

"Had to try something." Calvert shrugged, then winced as his rib hurt. "I have always been impressed with the fact that men can go for as much as *ten minutes*—*in* some cases longer—without breathing if their lungs have been first thoroughly saturated with oxygen. They found that out back in the nineteen-fifties, I believe.

"I knew we had no hope of doing that, but I relied on what we all know here—that after breathing oxygen at three pounds pressure in a space suit we can hold our breaths for about three minutes, instead of the average sixty to ninety seconds in air at Earth's normal fourteen pounds. The problem was to inhale that oxygen at a sufficient pressure while in a vacuum. The resuscitator made that possible. It was then a matter of working to a schedule."

"*And* of preventing decompression killing you at the same time," added Cousens. "As a doctor I'm afraid I'd have thought of too many—"

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The airlock hissed and sucked, opening prematurely, which alerted everyone for some emergency. Out staggered one space-suited figure, dragging another.

"Miller!" croaked Calvert. "What's up with him?"

Cousens had pounced on the limp figure and wrenched open his visor. "Asphyxia!" he exclaimed. "The resuscitator—quickly!"

"Help him, Evans!" McVey cried.

Evans unscrewed and removed Miller's helmet.

"He's pretty far gone," said Cousens as he took up the mask. "Someone get that suit off while I work on him." Without looking up he spoke to the man who had brought Miller in, and who now had his own helmet off. "What happened, Jeffries? How long has he been out to it?"

"Seems he collapsed soon after we got Calvert into the airlock. He was probably out a minute or so before Dick Day stumbled over him. We found he had only one oxygen bottle on his back, and that was exhausted."

"Only one?" queried Calvert. "*His* suit wasn't damaged!"

"He's got two here—on his suit!" said Evans.

"One's mine," replied Jeffries. "We switched it as soon as we found out what was wrong, and turned it full on."

"But why was he one short?"

"Dick Day found it hooked up to the resuscitator. He must have needed extra gas for you chaps."

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the soldier from the stars

by . . . Poul Anderson

It was an old pattern of history —the loss of human freedom, the foundations of culture destroyed. But man will always build anew.

IT WAS EARLY morning, local time, when I felt the plane tilt forward and start the long swoop down. I stirred uncomfortably, stretching stiffened muscles and blinking open sandy eyelids. You don't sleep well when you are burdened with such knowledge as ours.

Not that I had much responsibility. I was only a guard for Samuels and Langford; throughout the whole business, I was little except an observer. But maybe I had a chance to observe more than anyone else, which is why I am writing this for those who will come after us.

There were a good dozen others crowded into the plane, Secret Service men and brawny soldiers with loaded rifles between their knees. But they were an empty gesture, and we all knew it. Taruz of Thashtivar had said sardonically that the envoys might have one guard apiece if it would make them happier. That was me.

Samuels moved in the seat next to mine. The clear pale dawnlight came through a window and touched his hair with a white halo. His face looked old and gray, not like

When the author of THE HELPING HAND*—a shining landmark in recent science fiction—goes on a story-teller's holiday where armies of the future clash by night the world of today seems prosaic and remote. Poul Anderson has written many memorable stories, but seldom has he sent the entertainment meter soaring with characterization so vigorous, exciting and adroit.*

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the famous statesman and American plenipotentiary he was supposed to be. But then, we all felt small on that cold morning.

He tried to smile. "Hello, Hillyer," he said to me. "Have a good night's rest?"

"Hardly, sir. Just dozing."

"I wish I could have done as much," Samuels sighed. "Oh, well."

Dr. Langford pushed his nose against the window. "I always did want to see the Azores," he remarked. "But I never thought it would be under such circumstances."

He looked more human, less chilled and bloodless, than the rest of us. His keen eagle features were curved into a humorless grin, and the grizzled bush of hair as disordered as ever.

You may have heard of Dr. Langford, the physicist who was led through cybernetics into biology, neurology, psychology, and more understanding of history than most professors in that field. He was the best suited man in the country to act as Samuels' scientific advisor, though I wondered what good that would be.

I caught a glimpse of the island lifting before us, and then the plane was jouncing to a halt on the hastily enlarged airfield. Beyond its shacks I could see the little tile-roofed town, and a steep rise of land toward a sallow sky. There are only a few thousand people on Flores.

Our guards got out ahead of us, the soldiers forming a wary ring about the door while the Secret Service men conferred with the Portuguese officials.

Langford chuckled. "Stupid sort of thing," he declared. "If Taruz wished to wipe us out, those boys wouldn't make any more difference than putting two extra flies under a descending swatter."

"There are the Russians," answered Samuels wearily. "They might try, even though this is neutral ground." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I wouldn't trust anyone in this place where you can buy power over all the earth. I'm not even sure that I could be trusted."

We came out into a cool salt wind and the flustered presence of a small Portuguese colonel. I looked around the field. Several other big planes were sitting at one end. I noticed British and French insignia and the Red Star, and moved a furtive hand to the comforting drag of the gun beneath my armpit. Even as we stood there, receiving voluble greetings in a highly individual English, another speck grew in the sky, circled, and rolled to a landing. Egyptian!

The eagles gather, I thought.

"Eef you hentlemen weel to brreak your fast weeth me, please," said the colonel. "Deescussions are not to be for a many hours yet."

We followed him off the field. A rickety official car took us to a house which may have been commandeered for the occasion, where

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a very decent breakfast was served —none of the usual Continental *café complait* this time.

I didn't have much appetite, but stowed away a sizeable amount, not knowing when the energy might be needed. There was little talk, and it shied clear of the reason we were here. Langford alone came close to the truth when he asked: "How many nations will be represented?"

"Twenty-three," said the colonel. "A beeg congress, eh, what?"

"Of course," said Langford, "bidders will be working together—"

"Hentlemen, please!" The colonel looked distressed. "Eet ees altogether far from my province."

That was a joke, but I suppose he had his orders. In offering Taruz the island site, Portugal had gone to extreme lengths to emphasize her neutrality. She would not be in the bidding—where would the money have come from?—and she would not permit conferences between delegates outside of Taruz' stronghold.

I went into the garden afterward with Samuels and Langford. The envoy was nervously chewing on a dead stogie, and the scientist was littering the ground with cigarette stubs; his own hands were yellow from nicotine. Being that rare animal, a non-smoker, I concentrated on keeping an eye out for assassins, but I couldn't avoid hearing their conversation.

"Are you sure the British won't throw in with us?" asked Langford.

"Not at first, anyway," said Samuels. "Sir Wilfred represents the entire Commonwealth, you know; that's no small financial backing, what with the Canadian dollar being worth more than ours and all. It'd be quite a feather in his cap, and an answer to all the people yelling about American domination if he got Taruz' services exclusively for Her Majesty."

Samuels shrugged. "Frankly, I'd just as soon he did. We have nothing to fear from the British, and it'd be a huge saving to us if they paid Taruz. But of course, you know what our own nationalists would scream." He added soberly: "The important thing is to keep Russia from getting those units."

"I don't like it," said Langford. "Read your history and see what happened to all the world powers once they started hiring mercenaries."

"What choice have we?" shrugged Samuels. "It so happens that these mercenaries can lick any army on Earth."

"I still wish they'd stayed away," said Langford.

"I don't know. All right, so we pay them an enormous sum; but then we're safe forever—for many years, at least. We can relax the militarization which is ruining our whole tradition; we won't have to fear our cities being destroyed, we won't have to listen to those who'd strangle the Bill of Rights in a paranoid spy hunt—no, if Taruz can be trusted, and I think he can,

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this may be the greatest thing that ever happened to humanity."

"It's conventional to say that a certain Jewish carpenter was more important than any soldier before or since," answered Langford tartly. "I'm not a religious man, but there's truth in conventions."

After that, the talk declined. There was nothing they could say, after all. And Samuels was right, I thought; what choice did we have?

I went over the incredible background of the last three months. The giant ships soaring majestically around the world, hovering above every capital, swamping local radios with a broadcast in seven major languages.

"We are the free companions of Thashtivar, General Taruz commanding, and we seek employment—" The arrogant invitation to us to do our worst, and the explosion of everything from BB guns to hydrogen bombs leaving those shining metal forms untouched, the failure of poison gas and radioactive dust and airborne virus.

I was thinking too of the three demonstrations, spotted around the world and open to all who cared to see. In one a good-sized uninhabited island had vanished in flame while all Earth's seismographs trembled, in another our guns and engines had simply quit operating, and in a third men and animals had fallen unconscious before some invisible force in a radius of miles and lain so for hours.

It was a science as far beyond ours as ours is beyond the bow and arrow, a science which crossed the space between the stars, and it was at the disposal of the highest bidder for any defensive or offensive use he had in mind.

They must have studied us for a long time, hovering out in space or descending secretly; the perfection of their knowledge about us showed that the very study methods transcended anything we could imagine. Taruz' announcement had even revealed considerable financial shrewdness. He would only consider payment in dollars, pounds sterling, or Swiss francs, the rate of exchange not to be the official one but that prevailing in Tangier—one of the few really free money markets. He and his men must be allowed to spend their pay in any way they saw fit; no sale would be forced, but the contracting government might not forbid it.

"Why not the UN?" Langford's question was one which had been asked many times, in anguish, by all men who loved their race. "He could have gone to the UN, offered them—"

"Offered them what?" asked Samuels. "The UN has no army, and who would vote to pay him to set up one? He's not interested in teaching us his own science—probably a good idea, considering how uncivilized we are. He's a soldier, with his soldiering to sell."

"I know." Langford's face was grim. "I'm only saying what I wish he had done. But I don't suppose

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we could expect any other planet to hold a race of saints. They have as much right to be greedy and callous and short-sighted as we."

"What puzzles me," said Samuels, "is why there are such mercenaries at all between the stars. I should think a culture that far along would have outgrown—"

"I can only guess," said Langford, "but I think that there is no Galactic Union or Empire or whatever—no reason for one. A whole planet at that level of technology would be self-sufficient, little or no cause to trade; distances are too great, and the various races too alien to each other, to need or want a central government.

"But disputes may arise—relatively minor things, not worth risking an entire world for; so their petty wars are fought by hired soldiers, safely out in interstellar space. Insofar as comparison is possible, I imagine Taruz' culture is rather like that of the Italian city-states during the Renaissance.

"And because of temporary peace or something, he's out of work, so he came to this barbaric fringe of the Galaxy for any job he could pick up. With his earnings, he can buy portable wealth to take back home and exchange for his own kind of money."

The slow hours passed.

II

Our little colonel took us up to the hill. It was a jouncy ride over a road that seemed to be one long rut; at the top we could look across a metallic curve of ocean to the edge of the world. But we were more interested in the Thashtivarian camp.

The six great spaceships towered enormously above us, blinding bright in the sun. They clustered near the center of a circle formed by small, squat structures which I heard humming as we approached: generators for the protective force-field, I imagined. Within, there were two long, featureless buildings like outsize Quonset huts.

At each generator, a soldier lounged, holding a slim-barreled object that must be a gun. The free companions didn't bother with standing at attention, but there was alertness in their eyes. Overhead hovered a smaller craft, on guard.

"I think—" Langford rubbed his chin. "I think control of gravity, some means of artificially warping space and creating a gravitational field as desired, would explain both their ships and their defenses. The force screen is a potential barrier. Then they can also damp electrical and chemical reactions, perhaps by use of the same principle— A lot of good that does us! We haven't the faintest idea about gravity control."

Portuguese soldiers formed a wider ring near the base of the hill, and were escorting the envoys to the camp entrance. They'd enforce neutrality if they had to shoot all of us. Officially, of course, Por-

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tugal was in NATO, but that uneasy alliance had virtually collapsed, like everything else.

Other men were getting out of their cars. I recognized Sir Wilfred Martin of Britain, and Andre Lafarge of France, and Yakov Dmitrovich of the Soviet Union. The rest were strange to me, though I knew that some king-sized wheels were here today. My eyes were more on the Thashtivarians.

There weren't more than a few thousand of them. That fact had pretty well calmed most fears that they were out to conquer Earth. They could have whipped all our armies in the field, but the sheer task of administration would have been too much for that small number.

I noticed that they were about half female—natural enough, on the long lonely voyages they made, and a woman could handle one of their weapons as easily as a man. No children, and they all looked young, though probably they had some longevity system. A handsome race, startlingly human-like. The main difference was in the straight deep-blue hair, the pointed chin slanting down from high cheekbones, the oblique light eyes, and the yellow skin—not any of the brownish tints of Mongoloid humans, but a dully glowing gold.

They wore tight-fitting pants, soft shoes, loose tunics under metal breastplates, ridged helmets, and short cloaks, all in colorful hues. When they spoke, it was in a throaty purring language. All of them looked hard, toughened down to the very guts.

We were a muttering, unhappy throng as we stood at the invisible gate. A Thashtivarian officer approached us and bowed very slightly.

"Bon jour, messieurs," he said in excellent French. It had been announced that that language would be used at the parley. My year at the Sorbonne was one reason I was chosen for this trip. "Please come with me."

He led us into one of the huts. It was a single hall, bare save for long soft benches and a row of guards. There were no windows, but the material itself seemed to give off light and the air stayed fresh. At the farther end, facing the benches, was a dais with a kind of throne on it.

We were courteously shown our places, the delegates of the great powers at the front. There was a miserable time in which we shuffled portfolios and avoided each other's eyes. Then a door opened itself at the end of the hall and General Taruz came in.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, walking with a litheness that came near insolence. He was very plainly dressed apart from the seven-pointed gold star on his cuirass. His face was long and lean and straight-boned, the eyes pale blue, the lips thin. It was the coldest face I have ever seen.

He sat down on the throne and

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crossed his legs, smiling a trifle. The stillness that followed hurt my eardrums.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said at last. "I trust you have had a pleasant journey. Not to waste any more of your valuable time, let us get down to business at once."

Taruz made a bridge of his fingers. "I will repeat my terms to make sure they are understood. The Free Company offers its services for ten years to the nation making the highest bid. Payment may be made in not more than three annual installments. At the end of ten years, the contracting nation has the option of renewing for another ten at the same price, subject to adjustments in case its currency has depreciated meanwhile. If it does not take up the option, the rest may bid again. I do not think we will be on Earth for more than twenty years.

"Our services consist of defending whatever sites you choose and of assisting in any wars you may wage. We will not try to make policy for you; our part is but to serve in these capacities, though I may offer advice to be accepted or rejected as you desire. We will do our best, within the limitations imposed by our numbers and powers; however, I retain command of my forces and all orders to them will go through me.

"I believe that is the substance of the formal contract we will make. Are there any questions?"

"Yes!" A Pole stood up. He was clearly frightened, I knew that he was a cat's paw for his Russian bosses, but he spat out what he had to ask. "How do we know you will keep your word?"

For a moment, I think we all expected annihilation. Then Taruz smiled wider, completely unruffled. "A natural question, sir. I cannot give you references, since the nearest planet of my civilization is a good thousand light-years away, but I assure you that the Thashtivarian Company has always given satisfaction and that we never violate a contract. I am afraid you will just have to take my word. If you are suspicious, you need not bid today."

The Pole sat down, gulping in a dry throat.

"Now, gentlemen, what am I offered?" Taruz lounged back, not trying to excite us like a human auctioneer. He knew he had us strung close to breaking already.

There was another silence. Then Sir Wilfred got slowly up. "On behalf of Her Majesty's government and the British Commonwealth of Nations," he said, "I beg of you, sir, not to set men against each other in this fashion. The United Nations—"

Taruz frowned. For a wild instant, I thought of drawing my gun and killing him. But it would do no good, no good at all; in fact, he was probably shielded.

Sir Wilfred saw he was beaten and turned gray. "Very well, sir,"

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he said. "One hundred million pounds."

Samuels whistled. But actually, I thought, it was a ridiculously low offer. Two hundred eighty million dollars—no, less than that in Tangier—you couldn't fight even a battle for that sum nowadays.

Andre Lafarge rose, shakily. "One hundred and fifty billion francs!" he cried.

"In the accepted currencies, please," said Taruz.

"That is . . . I will say 500 million dollars . . . m'sieur." He had to swallow hard to get his pride down.

"This is a capitalist plot!" exclaimed Dmitrovich. "Your very methods are those of the degraded money-grubbing warmonger."

"Have you a bid to make, or a lecture?" asked Taruz coldly.

"Three billion Swiss francs!" At least Dmitrovich wouldn't use that foul word "dollars." I made it about 750 megabucks.

A dark man in uniform got up. "From Egypt," whispered Samuels to me, "on behalf of the Arab League—"

I needn't go through the next couple of hours. They were a nightmare, with distorted faces and gibbering voices and the destiny of our world tumbling like a football around the chamber; over the whole mess hovered the chill smile of Taruz, an image of Satan.

The lesser nations were soon squeezed out. France stayed longer than I had expected; her government must have made the desperate decision to declare all her money freely convertible. Through it all, Samuels didn't say a word. He was a good poker player.

When Russia, throwing in with the other Iron Curtain countries, offered some four billion dollars, I knew the crisis was on us.

Samuels got up. "My country," he drawled—odd how calm he was, all of a sudden—"bids four billion, one hundred million dollars!"

Wow! The taxpayers weren't going to like that at all. But what price freedom?

Dmitrovich snarled, and raised us a hundred million dollars.

Samuels caught the eye of Sir Wilfred, who nodded imperceptibly. His next bid was on behalf of both us and the Commonwealth: five billion.

Dmitrovich, white and sweating: that much, plus a hundred million more.

The Italians joined their previous bid to ours.

Dmitrovich cursed. I didn't blame him. Six billion!

Langford leaned over to me. "Here's where we separate the men from the boys," he whispered. But his own face was wet.

Samuels offered six and a half.

"This is encirclement!" gasped Dmitrovich. "The aggressors are leaguing against the peace-loving peoples of the world!" He turned around and faced us all. "I warn you, the Soviet Union and the people's democratic republics consider

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this clear proof of aggressive intent."

"Do you bid, sir?" asked Taruz.

"I . . . do. Yes. Twenty-five billion Swiss francs," said Dmitrovich.

That made over six billion dollars. The Soviets would have to make their own currency convertible . . . no, wait! With Taruz' help, they could overrun the world and pay him from its loot.

Samuels realized as much, I could see. His hands trembled. "Seven billion dollars!"

Eight, nine, ten—how long would it go on?

France joined us. So did the other Western nations, one by one. *Yeah,* I thought, *the Swiss and the Swedes and everybody else who stayed away were playing it real smart.*

I was watching Dmitrovich closely now. After fifteen billion, he seemed to reach some kind of decision. More likely, his government's instructions had decided something for him. He raised us nearly five billion right away. He kept on raising that much, each time around.

Samuels turned white. I didn't get it at first, but Langford explained it to me: "They've given up hope of outbidding us. Now they're just staying in to raise the price we must pay."

At fifty billion dollars, that price looked ruinous.

And if we dropped out, the Soviets still had their aim of world conquest to pay for them. I wondered if we might not be driven to such a course ourselves. Or was there this much money in the world?

"One hundred billion dollars!"

That ended it. Dmitrovich gathered his portfolio, nodded curtly, and stalked out with his satellites.

I don't remember very well just what happened next. I have a confused impression of people milling about, and talking, and being afraid.

Taruz was conferring with Samuels, and I caught a fragment of what he said: "—I hope you will be satisfied, sir. This conference has been an admirable example of diplomacy, not so? Open covenants openly arrived at—"

I thought his sense of humor rather fiendish, but maybe we deserved it.

What I do remember is Langford drawing me aside. He was very pale, and spoke fast. "We'd better get going," he said. "We'd beetter start for home right away. This means war."

He was right. We were still in mid-Atlantic, escorted by one of the Thashtivarian ships, when our radio brought the news that suicide air detachments had H-bombed America.

III

We passed over what had been Washington. There wasn't much to see through the dust and smoke

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which still roiled miles high. The suburban rim was a tangle of shards, and beyond it there was fire.

Samuels bowed his head and wept.

We landed in Richmond, and a platoon of Marines surrounded us at once. The radio code had told us that what remained of our government was holed up here. I recalled that this city had been the capital of the Confederacy—if Taruz knew, how he must be grinning!

His ships were already there, posted in the sky above us, and I gathered that a force-field would be switched on over the town at the first alarm.

As we drove to meet the President, I saw that the streets were almost empty, except for a few wrecked cars and sprawled corpses which no one had yet had time to clean up. The spectacle, and the smashed windows and scarred walls, told me what a murderous stampede had run through the town the day before.

People had fled, blind and wild with fear, and those who remained were now huddled behind locked doors. There was likely to be starvation before long, because it would be impossible to restore essential services to a whole country gone lunatic.

A guard at the door of our new capitol tried to keep me out. I flashed my badge at him in the best movie manner, and shoved him aside. Nobody had told me to quit watching Samuels and Langford. He let me by, which shouldn't have happened; but something in his eyes showed me how stunned he was. I felt an inward emptiness myself, and I hadn't lived through the last several hours here.

There was a long, time-mellowed conference room, and in it sat the leaders of the nation. The President had had the foresight to leave Washington with the Cabinet and chief staff officers as soon as he got word Taruz was on our side. Most of Congress must have gone up—*in hot air,* said a ghastly imp within me—and such as had also left didn't know where we were. The rabble-rousers were good riddance, I thought, and the rest might seem superfluous with the whole country necessarily under martial law. But there had been fine and honest men among them who would be sorely missed.

It was to Taruz that my eyes went first. He sat imperturbably beside the President, and in all the desolation around us his wild alien form looked only natural. There was a world map spread out in front of him.

The President nodded at us. "Good day, gentlemen," he said tonelessly. "I hope you're not too tired to get right down to work. We need every brain we have."

"What's the situation?" asked Langford.

Samuels had collapsed into a heap on one of the chairs, staring

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at nothing, but the scientist was inhumanly composed.

"Well, the Soviets have struck," said the President. "Obviously they hope to overcome us, throw us into complete confusion, before we can get organized enough to make much of General Taruz' help. Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, San Francisco, Detroit—they're gone."

As he moved his head, I saw how deep the lines in his face had become, almost overnight. "Clearly, they hope to bottle us up by wrecking our main seaports and industrial centers," he went on. "They're rolling in Europe and Korea. We've sent raids against Vladivostok and certain bases in the Urals, but don't yet know if they've succeeded."

"Why not Moscow?" snapped someone, a Cabinet secretary. "Blow those devils to hell, like they— Oh, God." He buried his face in his hands; later I found out that his family was gone with Washington.

"Surely you don't think their headquarters are still in Moscow," said the Chief of Staff. "I don't know where the Politburo is now."

"I think that information might be obtained," said Taruz quietly. His English was as good as his French.

"Eh?" We all wheeled about to look at him.

"Of course," he nodded. "Small one-man scoutboats, flying low with invisibility screens and telepathic receptors. I need only know approximately where they are to find them within . . . two weeks at the most. After that, one bomb—" He shrugged.

"That," said the President slowly, "kind of changes the picture."

"For what?" The Secretary of Labor leaned over the table and shook his fists at Taruz. "Why did you come here? Why did you want your, your blood money—from anyone who had it? You murdering devil, none of this would have happened if—"

"That's enough!" snapped the President. "We're faced with a fact. It's too late for recriminations." But he didn't apologize to Taruz.

The soldier took it in good part. "This war will be won," Taruz said. "It may take a little time, since my company is not large, but it can be won. However, there is the question of terms. You will note in the contract that the Free Companions do not have to act until the first payment has been made."

"Payment!" screamed the Secretary of Labor. "At a time like this you talk of payment—!"

The President nodded at two MP's, who led the weeping man out. Then he sighed.

"I understand your position, General," he said. "You owe us nothing, except in terms of a morality which seems to be unknown to you. But there are practical difficulties. The offices of the Treasury Department are gone—"

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thirty-three point three billion dollars," said Taruz coldly. "I shall have to ask that my quartermaster general be given powers in your Treasury Department to assure that the check is made good and that inflation does not rob us of full value."

"But—" The President shut up. It was appalling, to give the right to levy taxes away to a creature from space, with all the police powers implied, but Taruz had us and he knew it. There could be no argument now.

"Yes," said the President. "Please send your . . . man . . . to confer with our Secretary."

"Internal reorganization will also be necessary," declared Taruz. "There is no point in taxing and controlling prices if the taxpayers, merchants, and consumers cannot be located. I will appoint a couple of men to work with your officials."

The President lifted his head. "These concessions are only for the duration of the emergency," he stated.

"Of course," said Taruz smoothly. "And now shall we turn to the military problem?"

The next few weeks were a fever-dream. Like most people, I guarded my sanity by not reading many of the confused dispatches which came from all over our smoking globe, but simply concentrated on my work. That was with Langford at half a dozen cities, getting tracker shells into production.

We had given up on long-range missiles—the Thashtivarian ships handled such jobs better—but our armies in the field needed artillery missiles which could home on the target.

Officially I was still Langford's bodyguard; in practice, as soon as he found I had a degree in physics (which had given me a certain specialized usefulness in the Secret Service), he drafted me to be his assistant. Our job was trouble-shooting in both the organizational and technical lines.

Still, I did follow the broad development of the struggle—more so than most; because Samuels had arranged for Langford to be kept abreast of even confidential information, which he passed on to me. During that frightful summer, I knew that Army units stationed within the country had managed to restore a degree of order. There were more raids on us, but the bombs exploded harmlessly against Thashtivarian force screens, and only unimportant, unprotected Atlanta went to hell—by mistake, I imagine.

With Thashtivarian help, the Communists were soon bounced out of Korea and Japan. The Nationalist Chinese assault from Formosa to the mainland was also successful because a spaceship accompanied their army. Energy beams methodically melted the tracks of the trans-Siberian railway, thus cutting the Soviets off from their own eastern territory.

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A few raids on the gigantic prison camps, weapons dropped to the convicts, and we had the Siberian Commune set up and fighting with us. We let the Vietminh overrun Indo-China, and then isolated them for future reference.

In Europe, our forces were driven back to the Pyrenees and the English Channel, but there they stayed. It was bitter fighting. A few spaceships roved about, annihilating Russian forces wherever they could be found. But even such immense power was spread so thin that our men bore the brunt of the war.

Within one month, the head of the Soviet monster had been cut off. Taruz' scouts hunted down and killed the leaders, and located all the factories and military bases for his ships to destroy. But there were still millions of armed men, living off the country and fighting with a desperation that would have been called heroic if they had been ours. Even with Thashtivarian help, it would be a long haul.

"There was quite a conference in Richmond about strategy," remarked Langford one night. We were in a dingy hotel room overlooking Pittsburgh. The city was dimmed out, merely to conserve power, and it made the red glow of the great mills seem malignant in the sky. "The President was for negotiating terms with the scattered Red armies, but Taruz was for forcing them all to surrender unconditionally. He finally won his point."

"How?" I asked. I sprawled on the bed, too bone-weary to look at his drawn face. It seemed like forever since I had had a good night's sleep.

"By pointing out that his company wasn't going to be on Earth indefinitely, and that we had better make damn sure of a final peace while we still have this much strength." Langford pulled off a shoe, and it dropped to the floor with a hollow sound. "I suppose he's right. He always seems to be right. But I don't like it, somehow."

"Just why do you rate all this top-secret information?" I inquired.

"Samuels pulled for me. He said he wanted a . . . an impartial observer. What's happening is too big to be grasped by any human mind, and most of our leaders are too busy with immediate problems to think beyond them. He thought maybe I could spot the significant trends and warn him of them."

"Have you?"

"I don't know. If I just had to sit and think. But I've got my own immediate job to do. There's something, call it a hunch, I don't know, but I have an idea that somehow we're sacrificing our long-range interests for expediency."

"What else can we do?"

"Search me." He shrugged skinny shoulders and climbed into bed. "History tells us that no good comes of hiring mercenaries, but you know what Shaw said: 'The only thing we learn from history

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is that we learn nothing from history.'"

After a while I got to sleep.

IV

World War Three did not end; it fizzled out, bit by bit, through the next two years. In the first winter, it was plain that Soviet Russia had been smashed; but ridding the world of Communism was a long and bloody business. It was men with flamethrowers crawling through Indo-Chinese jungles, it was a bayonet charge up Yugoslavian hills, it was an artillery spotter dying to let his unit know where one tank was.

Taruz' forces were only of limited value in this small-scale war which spotted the world like pox. He could destroy or immobilize a regiment, but against guerrillas he could offer little except protection for the American base.

Martial law was lifted here at home on the first New Year's Day, and a specially chosen Congress met the day after. They were not a pretty sight; you couldn't expect them to be, after what the nation had gone through. Public contempt for their wrangling while millions of Americans starved did much to undermine our tradition of constitutional government.

Nobody said a word against the Thashtivarians, in spite of what they cost us. They were the heroes of the day. Wherever one of their haughty golden-skinned men appeared, a crowd would gather to cheer. A rage for their type of dress swept through the land, and women took to tinting their complexions amber and dying their hair blue. The aliens were always correct and reserved among Americans, even when they visited our night clubs where they were pretty lavish spenders.

I saw a less pleasant side of them in Russia, when Langford and I took a trip there in the late winter to study conditions. It was in Podolsk, near Moscow. There was muddy snow in the streets, and a raw wet wind melted it off the roofs, drip, drip, drip, like tears. A spaceship had landed and the Thashtivarians were out after loot. I smelled smoke in the air, and saw dead men in the gutters.

A soldier went by with an armful of tapestries and icons from some church; another was wrenching a gold ring from the finger of an old woman who cried and huddled into her long black dress. Maybe it had been her wedding ring. A third alien was leading a nice-looking girl off, she had a bruise on her cheek and followed him mechanically. Our races were enough alike for such attraction, though there could not be issue from it. I felt sick.

Still, such incidents were rare, and in accordance with the Thashtivarians' customs. Underneath all their technology, they were barbarians, like German tribesmen armed with Roman weapons. And they did

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not operate slave camps, nor exterminate whole populations, nor kill more helpless civilians than they had to. Our nation, the first to use atomic bombs and jellied gasoline, should not cast the first stone.

By the end of that year, things had settled down in the Americas. Europe and Asia were still chaos, but mile by mile peace and order were being restored. American boys were drafted and sent out, and many did not come back. But at home the work of reconstruction went on steadily and a hectic, rather unhealthy gaiety flourished where it could.

There wasn't much spending, though; Taruz' rigidly enforced economic program saw to that. People went about in sleazy clothes and waited in long queues for cigarettes and meat. They grumbled about the ferocious taxes, but at least there was no further inflation.

The Big Strike that fall raised a hullaballoo. It started with the coal miners, who saw all their painfully made gains swallowed in taxes, demanding higher pay, but it spread like a grass fire. For a week the country was almost paralyzed. Then the President declared martial law again and called out the Army. Soldiers whose comrades were dying for lack of supplies were not sympathetic to the strikers.

Langford told me that Taruz had gotten the President to do it, and mumbled something ominous about precedents.

For a while it looked like civil war. There was, indeed, open rioting here and there. But the President made a series of television appeals, and the Thashtivarians used their catalepsy beams, and the whole business caved in. Workers were sullen, but they went back to their jobs. Martial law was not lifted, but Congress continued to sit.

Shortly thereafter, Taruz himself, who had always remained in the background, appeared on a well-known news commentator's show. I watched it closely. He was a fine actor. He had dropped his usual arrogance, and said he was only serving his own people, whose interests were the same as ours. A plain and truthful statement of what his army meant to us in terms of safety, a few "human interest" remarks about his kiddies at home, a hint or two about the wonders to be expected when his influence got us in on Galactic civilization and commerce—and he had America in his hand.

There was one offhand saying of his which got Langford started on another round of worries. In proof of his own far-sighted humanitarianism, Taruz explained that he was investing most of his company's pay in large American corporations doing vital reconstruction work.

The money wasn't being taken out of the world, it was staying right here in the good old U.S.A. Why, you needed only to look at the next new building or the next big rubble-clearing bulldozer to see the

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benefits you were getting from it.

"The big industrialists will love him for that," said Langford wryly, "especially since all his money is tax free. That's written into the contract, you know. Fine print. And the people are conditioned to follow the businessmen's lead. Also, I happen to know that he's hired the three biggest public-relations outfits in the country to put himself over."

"Well, what of it?" I said. "It serves his own interests, sure, he makes a whopping profit, but it serves us too. Suppose he simply used the money to buy our machinery and oil and whatnot, and shipped it out into space. Where'd we be then? As it is, we get the use of the stuff."

"And he gets the control of it," said Langford. "Money is power, especially in so rigidly frozen an economy as ours now is."

"General Motors or General Taruz—does it matter who owns title to the machines?" I persisted. "It's not you or me or Joe Smith in either case."

"There's a hell of a big difference," said Langford. "But never mind. The pattern is beginning to emerge, but so far I don't see just what to do about it."

The United Nations met in Stockholm about Christmas time, and went into an interminable debate over revising the charter. I think even the delegates knew by then that the UN had become a pious mummery. Without universal disarmament and an international army to enforce peace, it could only handle secondary matters.

The smaller countries were eager for such an arrangement, and the United States, the only remaining world power, could have brought it about with one word. Samuels stumped hard for the idea prior to the meeting, but then he died—heart attack—and the man we did send was as stiff-necked as the Russians had ever been. Even had Samuels lived, there would probably have been no difference.

America was in no mood to surrender her authority. You heard a lot of talk about not being able to trust any foreign country because sooner or later, it would turn on you. We had paid a bitter price for dominion, and would not sell it for peanuts.

What we did do was make the new Russian Republic disarm and renounce war—something tried in Japan after World War Two. The newly liberated countries of Europe were too hungry and enfeebled to matter.

About that time I was able to quit working for the government, something I'd wanted for a long time. The old atmosphere of witch hunting before the war had been bad enough. But because I'd liked my work and believed in its importance I'd kept my mouth shut and stayed in. But now the new tight-lipped, puritanical notion that we alone could save civilization was just too much.

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Langford retired too, to accept a professorship at M.I.T., without giving up all his connections in Richmond. I got a position with an electronics firm in Boston, so we still saw a lot of each other. The next year I got married and began to settle down into the not uncomfortable creeping-up of middle age.

In the third year, the last Communist army surrendered, but there was no celebration because war was not yet ended. Order had to be restored to lands running wild with a dozen fanatic new creeds, whipped on by hunger and despair. We were fighting Neonihilists in the Balkans and Whiteslayers in Africa and Christomoslems in Southwest Asia. Taruz was a big help, but I wondered if it would ever end.

At least, I was free to wonder.

V

Langford glanced up from his newspaper as I came into his home. "Hello, there," he said. "Seen the latest?"

"The new war?" I asked, for the struggle between Portugal and South Africa had just begun, when the semi-fascist government of the latter tried to take over Portuguese Angola.

"No. The editorial. 'Any war, anywhere, may become another world conflagration. It is past time that we, for our own safety, laid down the law to nations which seem to know no law.'"

"That's an old idea," I said, easing myself into a chair.

"Yes, but this is a conservative and influential paper. The idea is beginning to spread."

I sighed. "What's so bad about it? A *Pax Americana* may not be the sort of thing I dreamed of once, but it's better than nothing."

"But what will we gain? Safety at the price of mounting guard on an entire planet . . . read your Roman history."

"Rome could have lasted if it had been a little smarter," I said. "Suppose they'd conquered Germany, Arabia, and southern Russia while they were in their heyday. That was where all their enemies eventually came from. The Empire might be with us yet."

"Yes," said Langford. "I'm afraid that something similar is about to happen. I never did like the Romans."

The natives of Angola, who knew very well what would happen to them under South African rule, rallied behind Portugal and licked the hell out of the invaders. Then India came in on Portugal's side, alleging mistreatment of Indian minorities—true enough, but an old excuse. They just wanted territory, Goa as the price of help and chunks of Africa as loot. This inspired uprisings in Spanish Morocco. One thing led to another, and Spain marched on Portugal.

Being more closely tied to the latter, we got involved, and from our Iberian bases soon quelled the

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Falangists. Then we proceeded to write the peace without consulting either Portugal or India. Such was our national temper at the time. Can you blame us after all we had suffered?

Taruz accepted the third installment of his pay and continued to serve us. Economic controls remained in effect, to keep inflation from depreciating his money, but things looked up a bit for the average taxpayer. You began to see some new cars and some clothes that were not shoddy. Langford showed me certain reports: Taruz was not only operating shrewdly as a major stockholder in established corporations, he was founding his own.

"But isn't that against the anti-trust laws?" I asked.

"If so, nobody is prosecuting," answered Langford. "Nobody is saying a word. We're too dependent on him by now."

He nodded grimly, and left me.

I noticed sentiment for the *Pax Americana* growing day by day. It seemed the only logical course to insure that we would not again be laid in ashes. Right now we were invincible; best to consolidate that position while we could.

There would be a new President this year. The incumbent party selected James, a previously obscure man—dynamic type, good speaker, good record as governor and senator, but nothing spectacular.

"Smoke-filled back rooms, eh?" I asked Langford. "How did he get picked? There were more obvious candidates."

"Money will do a lot," said Langford, "and I don't mean crude bribery— I mean influence, lobbying, publicity. Taruz has money."

"You mean this is . . . Taruz' man?"

"Of course. Why not? The Thashtivarians have a vested interest in us. It's up to them to preserve it. Not that James is their puppet; he just agrees with them on important issues, and thinks along predictable lines. That's all which is necessary."

I voted against James, mostly because Langford had disquieted me. But I was in the minority.

"I think," said Langford the night of the election, "it's time for me to stop croaking doom and start doing something."

"What?" I asked. "You claim Taruz is putting us in his pocket, and maybe you're right, but how do you make the average man see it?"

"I write a book," said Langford. "I give the facts and figures. They're all available, nothing is classified. It's just that no one else has waded through that mess of data and seen its meaning. I'll have SEC reports to show how much he owns and how much more he controls, the Congressional Record to show laws that are being ignored and new laws passed in his favor, the lobbyist registry to show how many hired agents he has, the assembled news releases and white

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papers to show how bit by bit he's gotten virtual command of the military—

"Oh, yes. A few thousand people will actually read the book, and they'll get alarmed and convince the rest."

"You could—get into trouble," I said.

"It might be fun," he grinned. "It just might be."

Having reached a decision, Langford looked happier and healthier than I'd seen him for a long time. "The Thashtivarians *can't* conquer us. There aren't enough of them, as was pointed out long ago. So simple a thing as a world-wide sit-down strike could get rid of them, merely by making Earth unprofitable."

He got a year's leave of absence from the Institute and went down to Richmond to gather his facts. I had to stay where I was.

The year passed, beginning with sporadic war over the world but material conditions rapidly improving at home. Some of the most irritating government controls were lifted, which made people think we were getting somewhere.

Taruz appeared again on TV and remarked that he thought we were far enough ahead now to start thinking about raising wages. Within a month, a bill permitting that had become law. In the general excitement and cheering, few of us seemed to notice that Taruz, the alien, the hired soldier, had in effect told us what we could do.

The news from abroad remained bad. China and India didn't like us, and said so. They formed an alliance. Some sharp questions were being asked in the British House of Commons, and Argentina was getting downright insulting. A lot of talk arose abroad about allying against a United States whose hand was increasingly heavy.

That it was. We had to have bases, and we had to requisition supplies, and all too often we had to dictate internal policy. There was no help for it, if we were to survive in an ugly world. But our satellites and protectorates didn't like it. I think only the fear of Taruz prevented a general war against us.

That fear was breaking down, though. It was being pointed out that the Thashtivarians couldn't be everywhere at once, that the destruction of the thinly spread American forces would leave them virtually without an employer and ready to bargain, that—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Only later did it occur to me how much of that talk must have been started by Taruz' own pawns.

In September, hell broke lose again. An H-bomb rubbed out most of Chicago. Its force screens had been turned off long ago in the confidence that there would be no more raids. The blame was laid on the Sino-Indian alliance. They denied it, and to this day I'm not sure if they might not have told the truth. But two million dead Amer-

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icans left us in no mood to listen. We went into all-out war again.

My factory shifted back to military production, and I worked pretty hard for two years. Protection was given to all our major cities, of course, and the civilian population was organized in a quasi-military manner, so things went smoothly and efficiently at home. The Thashtivarians labored hard for our side, and the Alliance surrendered in a few months. The war dragged on because by that time nobody in this country argued against the *Pax* idea, and it had to be stuffed down the rebellious throat of an unwilling planet.

It was. In two years, no country on Earth but us had any armed forces except local police. Every government was our puppet, and our garrisons and inspectors were everywhere. We still called our proconsuls "Ambassadors in chief" and our occupying armies "protective alliances."

But nobody was fooled or intended to be fooled. This could not be worked by democratic means, so a Constitutional amendment went through which virtually scrapped the Constitution. Congress retained certain powers, but the balance was now with the executive.

I waited for the secret police and the marching uniforms, but they didn't come. There was still a wide latitude of free speech, provided you didn't criticize the fundamentals or the top leaders. There were comparatively few political arrests, and little if any brutality in such cases.

As dictatorships go, this was a gentle one. And it showed considerable statesmanship in many ways, such as the international currency reforms, increased freedom of travel, and work to rehabilitate the devastated parts of the world.

It wasn't Utopia, but I wondered if it might not be better than we deserved.

VI

Langford had been called back to government service during the war —Intelligence this time—and for a while after, so I didn't see him for nearly three years. Then he came back to resume his professorship, and I went around to welcome him home.

We sat by the fire, with no other lights, sipping a good red wine and speaking slowly. The flames glowed, and danced, and whispered at us in thin dry voices; shadows moved huge in the corners, here and there lifting from an old picture or a dark massive piece of furniture. Outside, a winter wind muttered at the door. It was good, and snug, and very human.

"Did you see much of Taruz during the war?" I asked.

"Yes," said Langford. The red light wove across his hawk face with an oddly gentle effect. "Sometimes we worked together pretty closely. He knew what I thought, but didn't care as long as

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my actions remained loyal—in fact, I think he rather likes me. He's not such a bad sort. Not a fiend at all; just a smart adventurer."

"I suppose your book will never be written, though," I said.

"Hardly." Langford's laugh was small and sad. "Not because it's forbidden, but because it's too late. The Thashtivarians could not have conquered Earth, but—*divide and rule!*—they got us to conquer it for them."

"And now they own us, who own the world," I murmured.

"Not that simple. It's more accurate to say that they hold the reins. You'll see a gradual change in the next decade or so, shifting more and more of the power over to them, but it won't be obtrusive. Taruz is too clever for that."

"And what will he do with us?"

"Rule us. What else? I don't believe he's power-mad. I think he and his immediate successors will be rather easy-going and tolerant. What reason would they have to be otherwise? Ruling Earth is a profitable business. It means big estates and luxurious homes and lots of human servants and general high living—not ideological tyranny of the Hitler-Stalin sort."

He added after a moment: "Another shipload of Thashtivarian immigrants arrived last week. There must be a million of them here by now. But there won't ever be any great number, because they'll be the aristocracy, and an aristocracy must be kept small."

"You don't sound as bitter about it as you once did," I said.

"What's the use of being bitter about an accomplished fact? As a scientist, I've learned to live with facts. And to get moral about it, Taruz is no more than mankind had coming. A united world could have laughed at him. A peaceful world would never have hired him."

"The real situation was different," I protested. "You can't condemn your whole race just because Taruz arrived at an unlucky moment."

"True enough. But even with that setup, the free world could have stayed free. We might have averted war altogether by making it clear in advance that if we hired Taruz our only orders to him would be to get the hell off Earth.

"Or maybe we should have turned his services over to one of the small, neutral but democratic nations. Or if all this sounds too unrealistic, we had a chance to unite all our race at the Stockholm meeting. World government, a *human* world army, and Taruz would have been superfluous. He wouldn't even have tried to take over then, knowing it would never pay.

"But we had to be clever, and realistic. We had to look out for Number One. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice!*" Langford laughed harshly.

"Can't we do something, even now?" I wondered.

"No," we can't. Who's interest-

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ed? Ask yourself, Hillyer. You have a family, a good job, a nice home, security and a chance for advancement. Does the fact that someday you'll be saying 'sir' to every Thashtivarian warrant throwing all that away to die on the barricades?"

I shook my head.

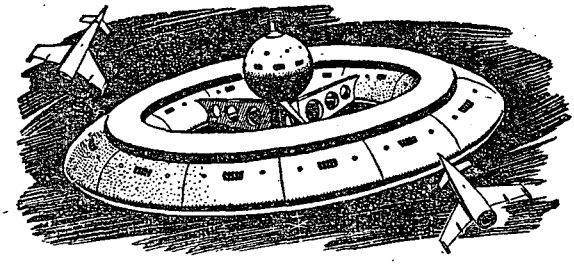
"It could be worse," went on Langford. "Taruz played his cards ruthlessly. His poker chips were human lives in the millions, but now that he's here to stay we'll get *some* benefits. No more war, which means a gigantic economic surplus of which man will get at least part; maybe, eventually, no more poverty. Perhaps we can learn a lot of their science, especially when they start getting lazy and training human technicians to man their machines for them. We lost our freedom because we couldn't get together as a race. Now the unity is forced on us, and it will last."

"But we *have* lost our freedom," I said. "The decisions may be wiser from now on, but they'll be made for us. Enter that on the debit side."

"Quite so. That's a fact we'll have to live with for centuries."

Langford stared into the fire, and a little smile played about his mouth. "It's an old pattern of history. Rome, Roman Britain—the hired soldiers were called in to help and ended by taking over. But there's another part of the pattern too. Conquerors are culturally assimilated, like the Normans in England; or they decay and can be overthrown at last, like the Hyksos in Egypt. Mankind can wait for one thing or another to happen. Our many-greats grandchildren will be united *and* free. It's up to us to start laying the foundation for them. *Right now.*"

He drained his glass and set it down.



Everyone everywhere is talking about them. You may scoff at them, and deride them. You may prefer to deny the wild, terrifying rumors, the sightings and near-sightings, and even the evidence of your own eyes when you look up at the sky on a clear night. But whether you believe or doubt, whether you are mortally terrified or calmly skeptical you are sure to be thrilled by Sam Merwin's unforgettable THE MAN FROM THE FLYING SAUCER *in our next issue.*

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hiding place

by . . . William Morrison

There are many ways of hiding a dangerous secret. But the deadliest way is not to conceal it at all.

HE WALKED UP to the door and then, for three full minutes, he waited. When at last the door swung open, he was staring at the man for whom he had been looking. And the man knew.

The cool gray eyes examined him knowingly from behind the rimless glasses, and the thin lips smiled as if in recognition. "You're looking for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Burroughs."

"Well, you've found me. Come in here, where we can talk in suitable discomfort. I hope you're not used to luxury."

"I'm not."

The door closed behind them. Burroughs said, "I'd like to know your name, if you don't mind."

"Does it make a difference?"

"It might. You're unlike the others."

"I'm Walter Bales. And you're right about my being unlike them. I'm a chemist, not a detective."

Burroughs smiled and said, "This is going to be a pleasure." He gestured politely. "Sit down, Mr. Bales. The chairs aren't as

William Morrison's versatility is just one of the many qualities which enable him to fulfill in superb fashion the literary conditions which science fantasy imposes on its most gifted practitioners. There are Morrison stories with the subdued flavor of mellow ale in nut-brown bottles, and others as exuberant as a swarm of golden bees. Now he has chosen to confer with a teacher of Latin, and the somber, restlessly pacing shade of Poe, and to evoke stark terror with a most compelling logic.

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weak as they look. Neither, by the way, am I."

Bales sat down. "I don't judge by appearances."

Burroughs smiled again. "I suppose they thought we could become rather chummy talking over old formulas together. Or do you say 'formulae'?"

"That may have been part of the idea. I much prefer 'formulas.' "

"Good. I'm glad you're no pedant. And perhaps they hoped we'd chat a bit about new formulas too?"

"That would be fine," said Bales.

"It won't work, you know. Nothing will work."

Bales had a strong inclination to agree with him. But he said patiently, "You don't get the idea, Burroughs. *Something* is going to work. There's too much money involved, and the fact that you've held out as long as you have is driving them frantic. Sooner or later they're going to find out what you've been hiding."

"It'll be later, not sooner, Mr. Bales. And if it's enough later, I won't mind."

"If you don't cooperate, you won't get a cent, you know."

"Of course I know," said Burroughs.

"Whereas, if you're willing to talk now, you can name your own terms."

"I'm still satisfied to keep quiet."

For the first time Bales paused to take a good look at the room. The furnishings were shoddy and worn, the rug threadbare. The table was as rickety as the chairs, and even the lamp shades were ragged. The man's clothes were fairly new, but of poor quality and unpressed. There was, obviously enough, no woman in his life. No second mouth to feed, no one to nag him about his poverty and urge him to accept the bribes he had been offered.

"You're going to lose your present job too, Burroughs. You realize that, don't you?"

"I've never been an idiot, Bales. I understand my situation."

"Not quite, or you'd be frightened." Bales said thoughtfully, "I'd like to ask an irrelevant question, if you don't mind. Why did you become a school teacher?"

"Simple enough," said Burroughs. "To rest my mind."

"That's why you chose a dead language as your subject?"

"That's the idea, Bales. Can you think of anything more soothing than droning through Caesar's Commentaries with a classful of uninterested schoolboys, translating word by dull word the same boring descriptions that have made young victims squirm for one unhappy generation after another? Why, I can teach the stuff in my sleep. I very often do."

"You've never taught science?" asked Bales.

"Oh, no. That would stir up thoughts that had better remain dormant. I shouldn't have minded teaching Greek, though. But they

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don't go for Greek in high school."

"A scientist who knows Latin and Greek. You're an unusual scholar."

"You're the first one who's come after me who's been unusual enough to think so."

Bales paused. The man seemed perfectly self-possessed, perfectly confident of his own ability to keep his secret. He had a right to feel that way. How long had it been now? Twelve years—but at first, of course, no one had suspected.

Burroughs said, "I'm surprised it took so long to find me. A mere change of name shouldn't have baffled you. And what is it they say about criminals—that once a man has chosen a pattern of crime, he doesn't change it? You should have known I'd continue to teach."

"You forget that you left us a few false clues," said Bales. "And we didn't think you'd succeed in getting another job in a school system. How did you supply the necessary records?"

"There was no trouble. A colleague of mine was offered the job and turned it down. I forged his name and used his record. And the salary was so low that no one else applied."

Bales nodded. If you had nerve and acted as if there was nothing to be afraid of, you could get away with almost anything. And it had become clear that behind his prim schoolteacherish front, Burroughs had nerve. Nerve—and brains.

Bales put his hand into his pocket for his cigarettes. As he pulled the pack out, he became aware of a faint tapping sound that came from behind him. He swung around.

A Great Dane had come through the doorway from the next room. It was the dog's claws that had tapped on the floor.

Burroughs said pleasantly, "He's been watching you all the time, you know. When you put your hand in your pocket, he had no idea what you'd bring out."

"You have him well trained," said Bales.

"Naturally. I'm ready for a limited amount of violence."

"Limited?"

"A dog is no match for a group of reasonably intelligent and very determined men. I know that the men behind you, Bales, are extremely determined, even if their intelligence is limited. But Arthur, here, would give me a little time. Time to kill myself and keep from falling into your hands."

"We have no intention of using violence."

"You used it before."

"We did?" said Bales politely. "That must have been before I was called in."

"They searched my rooms and found nothing. So they waylaid me one evening and knocked me out."

"And again they found nothing?" said Bales. "I suppose they forgot to tell me."

"It was after that incident that I decided to change my residence."

Bales said, "I'm sorry to hear

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of it. Obviously they had no idea of the kind of man you were. They should have appealed to your better feelings—"

"They did that too. They appealed to my love of money, my desire for fame, my patriotism. It didn't do them any good. You see, I knew what my discovery could do."

"All it has done so far is blow up a laboratory."

"But it did that so easily. And it could just as easily blow up a world. That's what I can't allow, Bales. When the proper time comes, when people are different—"

Bales waited, but Burroughs didn't finish the sentence.

"You mean you have the secret written down some place?" asked Bales.

"I didn't say that."

"You talk of killing yourself to keep the secret from falling into our hands. And then you say that when the proper time comes, people will be able to use it. Even though you're dead, they'll be able to use it."

"There does seem to be a contradiction, doesn't there?" said Burroughs. "Stupid of me. But as I told you, I've been resting my mind. These days I say many stupid things."

"Not many. Just this one. You've admitted that the secret is easily accessible."

"Have I? Why don't you take it then?"

"We probably will," said Bales pleasantly. "You see, Burroughs, *we* can say and do stupid things, and in the long run they won't do us much harm. But all you have to do is make one slip, like this one—and you're finished."

Burroughs stared at him and then turned to look at the huge dog. The animal quivered with excitement, and Burroughs said soothingly, "Easy, Arthur. Nothing for you to do."

Then he turned back to Bales. "You're lucky."

"Not lucky. Just patient."

"No, you're lucky that I'm the kind of man I am. That I'm the kind of damn fool, as you'd put it, who'd give up millions in royalties just because I know that my discovery would kill off a good part of the human race. That I'm the kind of damn fool who won't order the dog to kill you, just because I hate bloodshed. Even though you're the only man who has drawn the conclusion that the secret is easily accessible."

"I won't be lucky until I've found it."

"You won't be lucky then either," said Burroughs. "Get out."

Bales got out.

The man who was waiting for him at the corner said nothing. His look asked, "Well?"

"I've got a hunch, Ridley, that the thing can be found," said Bales.

"A hunch?"

"A hunch. Nothing more." No use telling Ridley about the slip

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Burroughs had made. Nor about the way the man had thrown him out. In this business it didn't pay to tell everything yon knew. When you told too much about other people, you also told too much about yourself.

Ridley said, "Is it in the apartment?"

"It can't be. When he got away from the other place, he didn't have a chance to take anything with him."

"I don't know. He didn't come home that time, but he might have found a way to manage."

"He didn't find any way," said Bales flatly.

"Well, he didn't have the thing on him."

"I know," said Bales. "You searched him."

Ridley said, with a certain amount of irritation, "Not in his apartment, not on his person. Where do you think it is? Put away in some locker room somewhere? Not after all these years. A safety deposit box? He'd have to pay the rent for it year after year, and we'd have traced it. Left with a friend? He had only one friend who was close to him, and we searched that one's home too. And besides, the man is dead now."

"So I've been told. I never heard how he died."

"Heart attack," said Ridley. "Don't worry, Bales, we had nothing to do with it. We didn't go around murdering."

"Good for you. By the way, how much do you yourself get when we find what we're looking for?"

"I get ten thousand," said Ridley. "Maybe an extra-special bonus if I'm very smart. You must get more. Maybe an even more extra-special bonus if *you* are smart. Still, it's out because there's no sense to it. This friend of his was another Latin teacher. He had nothing to do with science. And he was no man to keep secrets, either. We had him under our eyes for a couple of months, and he didn't even suspect it.

"Hell, even the kids he taught could read his mind. They could always figure out when he was going to spring a test, and other things like that. You don't leave an important secret with that kind of man."

"No, you don't. Still— How did he die, did you say?" asked Bales.

"Bad heart," said Ridley. "He was putting out a new edition of Julius Caesar—you know, that 'All Gaul is divided into three parts' stuff—and the excitement must have been too much for him. He keeled over just before he finished the last page."

"Nothing there, then. Still—all the same—and yet—"

Ridley nodded understandingly, the irritation in his voice stronger than ever. "Damn it, everything would have been different if we had been called in right away. But they never suspected. At first they thought that laboratory explosion was something ordinary—vapor

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fumes near an oxygen tank, or something like that. There were some details that didn't quite fit in with that theory, but you know how these investigators are. It was the easiest answer, and they took it. And when Burroughs quit, he gave them a sob story about losing his nerve. Two of the guys who worked with him had been killed and he said he was afraid of its happening to him. They didn't know he had found anything important."

He paused an instant, then went on, "They didn't catch on until almost ten years later. The hint came in an old progress report that had been filed away and forgotten. It wasn't much, but it was enough to start them looking for Burroughs again. And when he wasn't willing to talk—they knew."

"They'd been working in the laboratory on the same general problem all the time?" Bales asked.

"Full speed ahead. But no luck."

"Then there's nothing to do but keep watching him," said Bales.

But there was something else to do, and he knew it. No use telling it to Ridley though. Not when they were both thinking of a handsome bonus, and what one man got the other would undoubtedly lose.

Keeping an eye on Burroughs wouldn't get them anywhere. They could watch his comings and goings for the next week or month or year, and learn nothing. The thing to do was to use their brains.

Twelve years, and nobody else had hit on it in the laboratory. That meant that the discovery Burroughs had made was a lucky accident. It mightn't be made again for another hundred years—a thousand. And yet Burroughs had said people would eventually be able to use it—

It was Poe all over again, the "Purloined Letter" lying around in plain sight. Only, they weren't as simple-minded as Poe's detective had been. When they searched, they searched everything. Everything physical, that is. They hadn't been able to search Burrough's mind.

Bales was beginning to know something about that mind. Burroughs was not a man who cared much for physical comforts, and he wouldn't have chosen a physical hiding place, either. It would have to be something in plain *mental* sight.

Bales finally said with pretended weariness, "I don't think he intends to leave the house. I'm going down the street for a few drinks. Maybe I'll get an idea."

But he didn't want a drink. Whatever fictional detectives might say, he had never found that alcohol improved his powers of reasoning. Detectives and the people who wrote about them might drink at their work. Einstein and company didn't. All he needed was to get away from Ridley and have time to arrange his thoughts. The answer was in his grasp, it must be, or Burroughs wouldn't have considered putting the dog on him.

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He went down the street into a cheap, almost deserted restaurant, and got himself a cup of coffee.

A mental hiding place. Now, what would that be?

Somebody else's brain? No good. A man died, the brain died, and the hiding place died too. Look at that Latin teacher. A book? That would be both physical and mental. But they wouldn't have overlooked that. After they had read that old progress report they must have gone through every piece of paper in Burroughs' place.

They'd have read every book, paid attention to every note scribbled in the margins. Besides, that was out because it wasn't in plain mental sight. People wouldn't be able, when the time came, to find it, to use it.

Three cups of coffee got him nowhere. He left the restaurant and began to walk the streets.

A mental hiding place. A mechanical brain? No, it didn't fit, any more than a human brain would have fitted. A phonograph record? A tape recording?

Bales' eyes narrowed. He'd have to check with Ridley about that.

But it was no good. The next day he didn't ask any direct questions, but he got Ridley talking, and it was plain that this couldn't be the answer. Besides, there was no indication that a record or a tape recording wouldn't rot before it was found and played.

They had decided not to go to the school authorities about the forged information that Burroughs had sent. There was nothing to be gained by getting him thrown out, so that he'd have to leave town. Better to keep him here, where he'd be under constant observation.

But Bales did go to the school to learn a few things.

Burroughs was a good teacher. He took his kids from the beginning of Julius Caesar to the middle of the book, and then shifted them to something tougher and more interesting. He wasn't the pally type, but the kids liked him anyway, and even learned some Latin. Forged data or not, the school board was getting its money's worth.

Bales took a look at one of the textbooks, the pages of the first half grimy, where the kids had ploughed through them, those of the second half nice and clean. It was put out by some publishing company he had never heard of. The editor was Virgil K. Stuart, Head of the Latin Department at some jerkwater high school—

Excitement quickened through him. Wait a minute, that was the high school where Burroughs had taught. Vigil K. Stuart must have been his pal. But Virgil had never finished the text. What was it Ridley had said? He had dropped dead just before knocking off the last page. And yet here the thing was, neatly printed and already in use. Who had finished that last page? Burroughs?

Way back in his own high school days, Bales had gone through most

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of Caesar's Commentaries himself, and outside of Gaul being divided into three parts, he didn't remember a thing about it. What he remembered about Latin he could have put in a pig's eye.

But this was, you might say, a mental hiding place—a hiding place open to public view, too open to be suspected. He picked up a copy of the book and a Latin dictionary, and began to fight his way through Caesar's Gallic wars . . .

Bales was back at the man's apartment once more. Burroughs said, "What do you want to talk about this time?"

"The strange customs of the Germanic tribes Caesar fought," said Bales. "The peculiar medicines they used."

Burroughs' breath came faster. He said, "You've found it."

"Sure I've found it. You expected it to be found some day, didn't you? And after the hint you gave me, it wasn't so hard."

Burroughs must have made some signal. The dog padded in and stood there looking at the two men.

"Put your dog at ease," said Bales. "We've got some talking to do."

"What about?" asked Burroughs.

"How clever you are. And how stupid I am. It *was* clever, Burroughs, to choose that kind of hiding place. You finished Stuart's book, didn't you?"

"It was a labor of friendship."

"It was more than that. It gave you the chance to insert your pretty little formula in Latin right in the middle of Caesar's Roman gobbledygook. You knew what a Latin class was like. You knew that all the kids did when they translated was use words."

"They never expect to make sense out of Caesar," said Burroughs.

"Of course not. So when the kids came to your formula, they could translate it word for word, and not expect to understand it any more than they understood most of what they read. But one thing I don't get. How about the teachers?"

"I was the only teacher."

"Sure of that?" asked Bales.

"Stuart would have used his own book, but he was dead. I put up the money to publish it, out of my own savings. That's why I could insert the formula without anyone's noticing or caring. I used the book in the other high school, and in this one. But I didn't advertise it, and no other Latin teacher ever heard of it."

"So there are copies only in two high schools."

"And a couple of warehouses," said Burroughs. "Some day they'll be sold as remainders."

"Aren't they still in use in the other high school?"

"No. When a new teacher comes in, he uses a text he's accustomed to. He doesn't like to get stuck with an edition which may suggest a meaning different from the one he gives the kids."

Bales nodded. "You could count

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on the teachers not reading it, and the kids not understanding it. Copies, however, are lying around. And in the future, somebody with nothing better to do will start reading out of idle curiosity. Or some teacher with no money to spare for the standard textbook may pick these up as a bargain, and the thing will be read. And, eventually, understood for what it is."

"That's what I counted on. I hoped the time would come after people knew how to use it. Not now. Have you spoken to anyone about what you've found?"

"No."

The dog seemed to tense.

Bales said sharply, "Don't be a fool. If anything happens to me, especially here, they'll know I found something. They'll trace my movements, learn that I spent time with your book and a dictionary, and they'll have it. If nothing happens to me, they won't learn a thing."

"I can't take a chance. I hate to do it, but I have to kill you. I'll have to get rid of those books even if I burn the school—"

"You'd only give yourself away. Don't panic, Burroughs. If conscience can make you give up millions of dollars, do you think it can't make me give up ten thousand and a bonus?"

"I don't know. I can't take a chance."

"You have to," said Bales. "You have to take a chance on my intelligence. Let me remind you that I'm a chemist. I realize how easy the stuff will be to make. And once it was made in quantity, there'd be no secret. Everybody would use it, and I wouldn't live any longer to enjoy that ten thousand than you'd live to enjoy your millions. It's for my own sake that I have to keep my mouth shut. And incidentally, I have a wife and kid. Does that mean anything to you?"

Burroughs said frozenly, "I don't know. I've seen men with wives and kids—"

"I want mine to live. Goodbye, Burroughs. When the next guy comes around, don't talk. Don't open your mouth to say a thing."

The dog was still tense, but he made no move to stop Bales from getting to the door. There Walter Bales paused. "One more thing," he said.

"What is it?"

"Damn you for leaving me with a secret like this. How do you think I'm going to sleep nights now—like *you?*"

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the deep hole to china

by . . . Robert Sheckley

It's remarkable what a bright, eager youngster can accomplish with just a pail and a shovel. You'd better not look now, but—

MR. BENNETT PUSHED aside the Sunday papers and lowered himself deeper into the canvas porch chair. "It'll build up his muscles," he said.

"His muscles!" Mrs. Bennett protested indignantly. "He'll have a stroke, that's what he'll have."

Mr. Bennett was too sleepy to be logical. "Young boys never have heat strokes," he said vaguely.

They both looked down their back yard. It was a long yard, and their nine-year-old son Tommy was at the extreme end. Only his head and shoulders were visible in the enormous hole he had dug in the last five days. As they watched, a shovelful of dirt came sailing out, and onto Mrs. Bennett's rose bush.

"You must speak to him," Mrs. Bennett said, patting her forehead gently with a piece of tissue. "This is no weather for digging. I *knew* we should have sent him to camp."

"I can't order him to stop," Mr. Bennett said, not wanting to move. "We already gave him permission."

"Yes, but it was cooler then." Mrs. Bennett sighed unhappily. "It was all your fault, anyhow. You and your hole to China!"

For a good many months now, at totally unexpected moments, futuristically ebullient wonder children from inkwells presided over by Richard Matheson and Frank Belknap Long have been peeking in and out of our pages. These hardy gentlemen of the quill now have a formidable rival in Robert Sheckley, and much as we like children we're not sure we could stand the Tommy of this story for very long. But just for this once—he's wonderful!

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Mr. Bennett saw that he wasn't going to get a nap, even on his day of rest. With an effort, he heaved himself to his feet and walked slowly down the yard.

"How's it going, son?" he asked. Tommy was covered with perspiration and plastered liberally with dirt. He put down his shovel and rested against the side of the excavation.

"Not bad," he said, squinting professionally at his hole. "It's the first part that's tough."

"Mmm." Mr. Bennett peered into the hole. "Coming along fine. But don't you think you should knock off for a while?"

"I don't think so," Tommy said. "I guess I'd better keep going if I ever expect to get there." He started to jab his shovel into the hard dirt at the bottom of the hole. "I've just got to keep going."

Mr. Bennett hesitated. In a way, the whole thing was his fault. A week ago he had been reading his newspaper in the living room. Tommy was engrossed in a comic book. Suddenly the boy had raised his head and asked, "Dad, what's under us?"

"The cellar," Mr. Bennett said, turning a page.

"No, I mean *all* the way down. If you dug and dug as far as you could go, what would you reach?"

"China," Mr. Bennett said without hesitation, and without interrupting his reading.

"*Yeah?*" Tommy thought it over for a while. Then he asked, "You mean if I just dug and dug straight down I'd come out in China?"

"Yep," Mr. Bennett said, intent now on the sports page.

"Gosh! Can I, Dad? I always wanted to see China! Can I, huh?"

Mr. Bennett put down his newspaper and grinned. It would make a cute story for the office. His son was digging a tunnel to China. The Engineering Mind. Great things in store for that boy.

"Sure," Mr. Bennett said. "But it's a long way, you know."

"Thanks, Dad." Tommy put aside the comic book at once and began drawing diagrams of tunnels and sketches of the Earth. Mr. Bennett went back to his newspaper. That night he and his wife had a good laugh over it. "He'll be an engineer yet," Mr. Bennett told her.

But five solid days of digging!

"Son," Mr. Bennett said hesitantly, "isn't there something else you'd rather do? How about us going for a ride in the car?"

"Nope," Tommy said.

Mr. Bennett stepped back as a shovelful of dirt landed on his feet. "It's too hot for digging," he said firmly.

The dirt continued to fly. "I'll be finished with the tough part soon," Tommy said. "I gotta get this first section done before it hardens."

"Your mother feels that you should stop," Mr. Bennett said in desperation.

"But you promised! You prom-

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ised me I could do it! It isn't fair to stop me now. You promised me I could—"

"All right, all right," Mr. Bennett said hastily. "But first come in and drink some milk."

"In half an hour," Tommy said, and the dirt began to fly so wildly that Mr. Bennett had to retreat to the porch . . .

The next day was Monday, and Mr. Bennett went to the office as usual. When he returned that evening, his wife told him that Tommy had been digging all afternoon, and that the rose bush was practically smothered.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Mr. Bennett asked.

"He won't listen to me. Besides, it's *your* job."

After dinner, Mr. Bennett walked out to the backyard. Tommy was working steadily. The hole was as deep as his head now, and the boy had to lift the dirt out in pails.

"Just a minute, son," Mr. Bennett said.

"What's the matter?"

"Son, I've talked this over with your mother, and I'm afraid we both feel that you should stop."

"But Dad!" Tommy cried in an agonized voice. "I can't stop now! Gee, I've almost reached the soft part. It'll go faster after that."

"You said that yesterday," Mr. Bennett reminded him.

"I didn't figure right. I'm almost at the soft part now."

Mr. Bennett hesitated, remembering something. At Tommy's age he had wanted to build a little automobile with a washing-machine motor. Before starting work, he had gone down to the police station to find out if he could license it. How they had laughed at him! He could still remember his embarrassment, and his black hatred of all adults for weeks to come.

He didn't want to make Tommy stop. No one could spare him the disillusionment of finding that China is always a long, long way off, too far, no matter how willing the hands that dig toward it.

"Son, how much longer do you want to work on this?" he asked gently.

"I think I'll be done by tomorrow night," Tommy said. "The soft part'll go fast. Besides, I think I can get help—"

"All right," Mr. Bennett said. "But tomorrow night will end it. Right?"

"Yeh, I guess so," Tommy said. Already he was flinging dirt with an energy that Mr. Bennett couldn't help but admire.

Tommy worked steadily through the long Summer evening. At last Mrs. Bennett had to bring him in forcibly, and divest him of at least five pounds of dirt . . .

It was even hotter the next day, and Mr. Bennett worked in his air-conditioned office and worried about his son. Twice during the day he reached for his telephone, but stopped each time. This evening would end it once and for all.

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The train ride was murderous, and Mr. Bennett arrived home nearer a heat stroke than his son had ever been. His wife poured a cooling glass of lemonade, and he collapsed gratefully onto the couch.

"Is he—" he gestured toward the back yard.

"He is." Mrs. Bennett shook her head. "I hope you're satisfied. I trust his illusions are intact. My roses are ruined. *Now will you kindly make him stop?"*

Mr. Bennett stood up, but at that moment Tommy sprinted into the living room.

"All done!" he shouted, with so much energy that Mr. Bennett felt three hundred years old.

"What's all done?" Mrs. Bennett asked.

"The hole. I got there all right. I told you it'd go fast once I reached the soft part. Come on outside quick!"

The Bennett's exchanged meaningful glances. Mrs. Bennett hissed, "If that boy's mind is affected, the blame is completely and entirely yours."

They walked out the back door and stopped dead.

Facing them and grinning broadly was a little oriental boy of about nine, dressed in white quilted jacket and shiny black pants.

"He was digging from the other side," Tommy said. "That's how I knew it wouldn't take too long. He was digging too."

Mr. Bennett thought he heard a ringing in his ears. He walked quickly to the hole in the back yard. It was neatly filled and smoothed over.

"We had to fill it again, Dad," Tommy said. "You see, his folks didn't want him to come. They would've followed him if we had not filled it again quick."

"This is entirely enough nonsense," Mrs. Bennett said. "Little boy, where do you live?"

The little oriental boy bowed and answered them in a high, sweet sing-song voice, but the Bennett's couldn't understand a word of it . . .

There had to be a rational explanation, and the Bennett's figured it out. The Chinese boy must have been travelling with his parents. He had wandered away when they stopped somewhere, had gotten lost. His parents were probably frantic. So the Bennett's put announcements in all the newspapers, including the Chinatown papers in New York and San Francisco, and notified the proper authorities.

They expect an answer any day now, and in the meantime have received permission to keep the boy in their home. But Tommy has Mr. Bennett worried again, although he knows there is no reason for it.

It seems that Tommy and the Chinese boy are now building a space ship. They plan to leave for Mars around next Tuesday, weather permitting.

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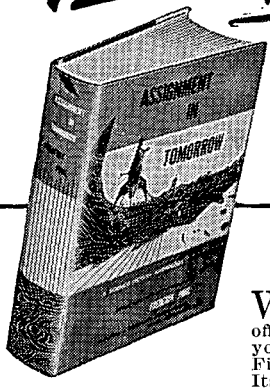

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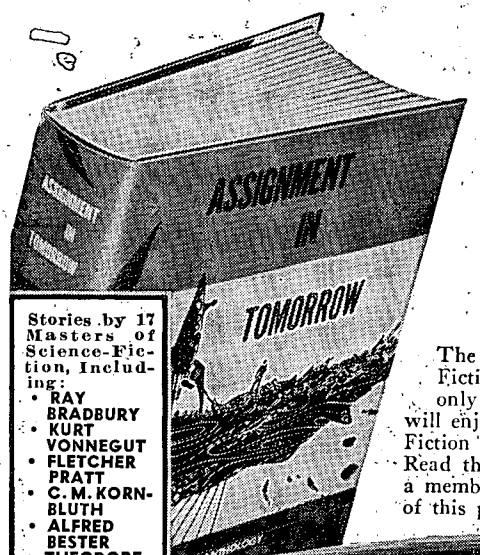

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